

DAVID BATE

PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER POSTMODERNISM

Barthes, Stieglitz and
the Art of Memory

PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER POSTMODERNISM

In life after postmodernism our conception of photography is not the same as before. *Photography after Postmodernism* starts with this conception and explores what changes have affected photography, its relation to social life and our image-centred culture.

Engaging with the visual environment and issues that have emerged in the postmodern world, David Bate introduces fresh approaches and analysis of photographs and their place within the aftermath of postmodernist thought. The book shows how photographs circulate in an 'image-world' beyond their art or media origins that deeply affects our sense of time and relation to memory. The role of archives, dreams, memories and time are deployed to develop and resituate arguments about photography made by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* to further engage and understand our contemporary condition. By considering how 'afterwardness' is invoked in the developments of modern and contemporary photography, Bate demonstrates the complex ways in which photographic images resonate across public and private spaces, while carrying a slippage of meaning that is never quite fixed, yet always contingent and social. The approach shows how modernist photography was already invested in values that its discourse could not enunciate, which resonates with much contemporary photography today.

Featuring a range of historical and contemporary images, the book offers detailed and innovative readings of specific photographs which open new avenues of thought for those studying and researching visual culture and photography.

David Bate is Professor of Photography at the University of Westminster, London, UK. His many writings on photography, theory, art and culture are extensively published. His first book was the highly acclaimed *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent* (2004); and the widely translated *Photography: Key Concepts* (2019) continues to be an essential introductory book for photography students. Also a practising artist, his photographic projects have been shown in Australia, China, Europe, South Korea, North America and the UK.



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Art of Memory

David Bate

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FIGURE 0.0 David Bate, *Screen Memory*, 2020.

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FIGURE 0.1 Barbara Kruger, 'We Don't Need Another Hero' billboard project (London), *State of the Art*, 1987. Photograph by the author. The billboard was one of many that accompanied the Channel 4 TV series called *State of the Art* that aims to set out the conditions and debates of 'postmodern art'.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this book *Photography after Postmodernism* probably suggests a kind of belatedness. Like the morning after a party the night before, people awake bleary eyed and sleepy, trying to remember what happened by tidying up. The ‘after party’ analogy is relevant since many people felt anyway that ‘postmodernism’ was a kind of ill-judged party, a temporary blip, an aberration in behaviour, a transgressive moment of madness and lapse of judgement from which we would all soon recover and return *back to normal*. Yet if anything is to be learned from the cultural, political and economic shocks of the decades since postmodernism hit the streets, it is surely that things do not return to ‘normal’. Things change; we become used to them as habit. The ‘multiple transformations’ of postmodernity, Fredric Jameson, one of the key figures to popularize it, has said, are something we are still living through today.¹

For some people even raising the question of ‘postmodernism’ today might seem like a futile project. After all, even if photography was a central component to it, didn’t ‘postmodernism’ happen long ago? Surely there are more urgent and important topical issues today? Perhaps there are, and many would agree, but are different critical issues and problems mutually exclusive? And furthermore, as the thesis of this book argues, unresolved issues have a habit of coming back to haunt us in different ways. The unseen presence of past problems affects the present in the same way that unresolved traumas are known to gnaw away at the human psyche. The concept of *afterwardness* in psychoanalysis, as evident in this book and its title, at least teaches us that much.² But what is the evidence for a lack of resolution of issues about photography in the present?

The evidence is everywhere and particularly visible in the flurry of new conceptions of photography in what now is called our ‘contemporary culture’: *post-photography*, *post-media*, the *post-medium* age, *transmedia*, *expanded photography*, *post-internet*, *post-truth* and so on.³ These all paradoxically indicate a temporality

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of the present fundamentally anchored to a past that it has not left behind: 'photography'. The concept of photography today seems to be governed by a sense of *afterwardness*: it is haunted by its past. The shadow of the past casts its presence and invades the sense of present-future of contemporary culture. The democratic expansions of photography since the 1980s, the new automations and portable mobilities of popular technological media in the 1980s and 1990s are part of this story. However, this book is not a *history* of the present, even less a technological history of photography. It is not even a history of photography *since* postmodernism. That would be a different and an even more vast project: the problematic globalization of photography, visible in the uneven shifting developments of the international art photography market, with its plural offline and online multi-locations and contradictory affiliations, which have rendered the old telos of modern art history (e.g., the chronological catalogue of great art) as irretrievably doomed to failure – as inevitably selective and partial in a manner that is no longer acceptable or retrievable by art historical models of the past. (Photography does not fit into art history because, like art itself too, photography has transformed it.)

Instead, this book is a reflection on the 'after', the nightmare of the morning after the night before. The task is not so much one of 'tidying up' the debris of the post-modernist party, but of considering what it is like to live in its aftermath. In this sense it is closer to an archaeology of the present, to pick out threads, issues and tissues in which the consequences of postmodernism for practice and its theories in photography can be traced, picked out amidst the role of critical theory and historical analysis.

Inevitably there is considerable disagreement about what postmodernism was or is, what it meant for modernism, to whom and why, whether it was valid or true, and for that matter whether it has any consequence at all. The aim of this book is not to resurrect those debates, but to consider the issues it has left for the present study of photography. 'Photography' is understood in this book as a social and cultural practice (with economic and political implications) whose theory involves different 'levels' of understanding, from the atomic particles of photographic technology (not discussed in this book) to the institutional practices and discourses that sustain them in acts of power, pleasure and purpose.

The historical invention of photography is one of the keystones of industrialized society and has shaped our modern formation of culture in more than just what it looks like, but also attitudes to memory, and its relations to space and time. The very idea of an automatic recording of an image, an 'instant' picture, has had a profound effect on the perception of events themselves, as Walter Benjamin had noted in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴ The social ubiquity and liquidity of photography has transformed ideas of art and culture and continues to do so in the digital production of image stillness. The continuing specific presence of the *still* photographic image, which endures despite all the 'convergence' between still and moving digital image camera technologies, requires a specific understanding. I believe we have not yet sufficiently understood the transformational aspect of the still photograph's cultural presence and the very persistence of its value of stillness. When everything else is in motion in culture, what does this stillness enable? With

all this in mind the specific issues of this book are better pointed to and introduced by the terms of its subtitle: *Barthes, Stieglitz and the Art of Memory*.

Roland Barthes and Alfred Stieglitz – two dead white men, one gay, one straight – certainly make strange bedfellows. Both, in their own way, have made significant contributions to the development of photography. Alfred Stieglitz, based primarily in New York (with notable sojourns to Europe) at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, was central to the establishment of modern art photography (which included women and men) and, just as importantly, he also developed the language and discourse to culturally support it. Like other movements in art of the modern period, the ‘newness’ of this discourse attempted to say something that had not been socially expressed, yet also concealed something at the same time.

Roland Barthes, based in France, was a critically important figure for European intellectual theories of culture, and his relatively few, but highly influential writings on photography have been critical in a theory of its social use and application.⁵ Barthes also cast a vast influence on literary criticism and a wider interdisciplinary approach as itself a practice, until his death in 1980. His final seminars were concerned with memory and Proust. It was in this last period that his last book *Camera Lucida* began to circulate and attract popularity. It was at this time that postmodernism was also beginning to emerge as a popular cultural ‘idea’, and photography as one of its central objects of scrutiny. *Camera Lucida* also had an academic effect of turning photography into a respectable and accessible topic across a number of disciplines that had basically hitherto ignored it. Barthes, it was understood, had provided a template for how and what to write about photography. Suddenly, literary critics, film critics, philosophers, art historians and writers in the literary world ‘discovered’ photography, and it began to gain a wider currency in academic disciplines that it had been invisible in before – treated before as something like a kind of portable photocopy machine. Photography was elevated more into art the more the twentieth century approached its closure.

I How are you feeling?

At the beginning of *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes makes a surprising set of comments:

my desire to write on Photography ... corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, those of sociology, of semiology, and of psychoanalysis – but that, by ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it might be): a desperate resistance to any reductive system.⁶

Barthes’s sense of a conflict between critical and expressive discourses marks the period he was writing in and its difference from our own. Today expressive

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values have changed; no one has a problem pronouncing with the authority of their own feelings. The first question journalists often ask victims at tragic events is 'how do you feel?'. What is more, what might have once been seen as an 'invasion of privacy' is now not only given up voluntarily, but actively self-generated and mediatized. Barthes had already described 'the publicity of the private' as a 'new social value' in 1980.⁷ In the democratic outpouring of emotions, the contemporary language of photography today is much the same.⁸ If the expressive urge of the self has sometimes been a subtle replacement for critical discourse or analysis, this was not what Barthes had in mind in his 'reflections on photography' – as the subtitle of *Camera Lucida* put it. *Camera Lucida*, like this book, was written at the intersection of several discourses and disciplines relevant to photography, and – like this book – is not willing to be subsumed by any one of them.⁹

The main thread of Barthes's book, for those unfamiliar with its discussion, is his distinction between the social reading of any photograph and the possibility of a separate personal subjective meaning given to it by the same individual spectator. Barthes gave Latin names to these public and private distinctions as *studium* and *punctum* respectively. The cultural dimension of this *studium/punctum* distinction became, in effect, in the hands of its readers, a conflict between two types of language: between the discourses of social criticism and private feelings and emotional affect in its viewer. While both significations are of course legitimate fields of experience – and study – what critics and writers on photography began to pick up from this was that it was 'OK' to invoke their own 'subjective' response to photographs – a model of discourse incidentally initialized by Alfred Stieglitz. For all its shortcomings and apparent return to an old mode of personal criticism governed by patriarch critics (figures like Stieglitz who set themselves up as arbiters of photographic taste) the new expression of emotional effect (oddly repressed in modernism) suddenly appeared as a kind of democratic liberation from the tyranny of the symbolic signifier by a new multitude who expressed this in multiple ways. It is not, of course, that Roland Barthes and his book were singularly responsible for this, although his book did have an important impact. I am merely using the specific formulation he made there as a shorthand figure for the way these more general cultural shifts have occurred. What was lost here from Barthes's *Camera Lucida* essay, however, was the nuance of the *dialectic* between public and private meaning in a photograph. (Although it would be fair to point out that the narrative drama developed by Barthes did tend to overlook this dialectic.) What was lost from the usual understanding of subjective experience as criticism was also the crucial impact articulated there on the social effect of photography on the role of memory and conception of time. (See Chapter 2, 'Barthes and *Camera Lucida*'.) Barthes had in fact been giving seminars on Marcel Proust and memory at that time too, discussing some of the photographs obsessively collected by Proust himself.¹⁰ Thus, the reason for Barthes's refusal to settle on any one discourse in his book was the open nature of its aim and question: what is the effect of photographs on the subjectivity of the spectator? But *Camera Lucida* opened a new problematic

too on cultural time: what does photography do to temporality in the memory of the spectator?

It is perhaps then no simple coincidence or at least curious that when Barthes published *Camera Lucida*, the French historian Pierre Nora was also busy addressing the developing tension between the concepts of memory and history. Nora wrote at that time:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.¹¹

Nora had identified a widening gulf between ‘official history’, as embodied, for example, in the national histories of nation-states, and the living memory formations of group identities in its population. Nora’s argument was that the new upsurge of personal memory over the discourse of history speaks to changes, at least in Western societies – from where I am speaking – about a widening gulf and conflict between them. One might see a direct parallel in the split between personal memory and social history identified by Nora and the new focus on subjective memory (as the *punctum*) over the historical and social (studious) aspect of photography in *Camera Lucida*. If History had, as Nora argued, become problematically singular and chronological, the proper noun of the nation, dominated by the constructed story of the nation-state (presented as a set of sub-narrative portrayals of its ‘heroes’ and villains) then the upsurge of ‘unofficial’ memories represented the very fragmentation of that singular narrative of national History. The stark contemporary public example of such contestations is the frequent flare-ups of conflict around public monuments and statues. The contemporary understanding of them is split between their role in an established official history and the *different* cultural stories, as memories held by different social groups, for whom the very presence of those monuments and figures represents an active repression of their own cultural memory and identity, marginalized by history. (These conflicting views are often directed at the photographic presentations of these monuments.) The national narrative, a tradition established on the nineteenth-century model of ‘History’ as presented by symbolic commemorative public monuments and figures, is set in direct conflict with popular memories and lived experiences. For Nora, this means that the very coherence of national ‘history’ is ‘dilated, multiplied, decentralized, democratized’ in the new ‘materialization of memory’.¹² New technologies are also implicated in these transformations. The agonistic memory-work of social groups, individuals and communities whose voices were never heard before finds form in new modes of presentation which confront the official accounts of ‘history’ and thereby fragment and shatter its singular narrative. Memory-work emerges in

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new ways – especially since the 1980s – expressed via agents in diverse new media presentations.¹³

A key resource for new memory-work practices is the pervasive wealth of photographic images in different archives, found not only across multiple public and institutional archives, but also accumulated in private family homes, in photographic albums, envelopes and amassed on storage devices, all made by a myriad of scattered individuals. The new social consciousness of these archived images as new resources for the construction of memories grows exponentially, as they are amplified further by digitization and online databases. Multiple public social, cultural and private individual archives are mobilized, mixed and disseminated across even wider social platforms, new apps and transmedia formations. I liken these increasingly animated archives to the reservoir of dream-images, which haunt the daily memories of those who have seen them. (See Chapter 6, ‘Archival Dream’.) For the philosopher Jacques Derrida, ‘nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word “archive”’.¹⁴ The question here is of what the archive *speaks*. The massive ‘archival turn’ in visual studies, and rise of memory studies across the humanities, indicates more than a simple return to the past, it is a wholesale change in attitudes towards both history and the future too. The remains of the past erect themselves like monuments, dressed in ruins, with visible inscriptions often as mute and silent as their historical meanings, but re-animated in the discontent of the present. Something is said, but something remains unsaid. Does looking back mean a retrieval of the past, or is memory used to obstruct or reconstruct the social historical process of looking forward? Are these cultural mutations in which photography has been intimately involved the symptom of changes to the cultural experience and sense of time?

II Time

Time is changed. The old temporal narrative logic of past, present, future that governed earlier Western societies takes on the multi-temporal formation of the dream-image. Past and present images are mixed in the same economy, they collide together, congealed (condensed) in apparently non-contradictory ways into new images of our cultural time. This was also the description given to the *postmodern condition* of Western societies by Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard and others. (See Chapter 1, ‘After Postmodernism?’.)

The profound almost unspoken impact of photography on humanity has changed, minute by minute, our conception of historicity and the temporality of time. The ancient lingering presence of history and historical time as an ambiguous ‘the past’ is apparently fixed in the industrial tick-tock ‘clock time’ of photography. Photography has changed our sense of time and space. The temporality of the ‘present’ that we live in is populated by the accumulated archives of the past that transform the relations between present, past and future. Hence the sense of the ‘post-’, of post-photography, of the post-modern and even the post-internet.

The eagerness to be in the *afterwards* of things suggests this shift in temporality, whose name is figured only by what it is not. Despite all the technological mutations to its body, 'photography' is a noun that sticks around. Even after the JPG, the TIFF, the GIF, the DNG and other technological acronyms, the concept of the photograph refuses to leave. We must attribute this continued pervasive presence of the photographic still image not to some techno-ontological essence of 'photography', but to its continued social use-value of *stillness*. Photography has 'stuck around' because we want it to. The photograph grants a stasis, a stillness, which is not given in nature. The constant movement of planetary life means that photographic stillness offers a special space for fascination and wonder.

The eighteenth-century concept of the pictorial *tableau* of Denis Diderot's Enlightenment project was *already modern* in its conception of the visual image. The frame of the picture was no longer seen as a mathematically defined screen, an imaginary window on God's nature, but a scenographic space for the *human* body and the spectator's *real* experience of it. Diderot's theories centre on representation and narrative, where visual gestures and bodies are organized into a spatial logic in which they intersect and collide as meanings, dressed in grimaces and expressions that narrate the pain, joy and sensations of life. Diderot's theories of the *tableau* are the unconscious trans-medial model for contemporary forms of visual drama and elaborate the aesthetics of pictorial forms concerned with human emotions not only in painting or sculpture, but also the meanings in cinema and photographic strategies long before they were invented. (See Chapter 3, 'Return of the *Tableau*'.) The classical model of representation on which it depends seems something of a paradox, belonging to another era, but its powerful grip on the imaginary time of the contemporary spectator is no less fascinating for that even today. (See Chapter 7, 'The Photographic Episteme'.)

III Realism seems quaint

For what it is worth my view is that 'postmodernism' gave a name to and identified significant changes in the cultural status, value and use of images across industrializing cultures, specifically the use of photographic images. No matter how inadequately it may have theorized it, these changes have had massive implications for the political economy of images within the growth of global communication systems since the wide computerization of language and images. It is thus significant that one of the key theorists of cultural postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, already had turned his attention towards globalization after postmodernism and to the emergence of different indigenous local traditions of culture on global platforms in the 1990s. If, for some, postmodernism had signified a cultural collapse of 'proper' Western values into an 'eclectic' mix of values of (a valueless) modern consumer culture, then the global emergence of different local traditions on the global stage was its counter-point argument. The new ethnicities and regional identities could be read as either a signal that capitalism had spread its rapacious appetite to ever further margins of the planet, or a positive sign that Western culture itself was being 'de-centred' in the growth of a multi-polar truly global world.

In effect, the old agonistic conflicts and debates within postmodern cultural theory about the new fluidity of value and meaning of pictures in consumer capitalism were projected outwards and dispersed into wider questions about the specificity of culture. What does it mean in Hindi culture to eat a McDonald's burger, or in the UK to eat 'Indian food' as a sign of 'Englishness'? What does it mean to look at photographs by a Korean photographer depicting historical scenes from European history? How far might the cultural meaning of objects be their subject matter, or is it the way we *use* and 'interpret' these images that matters most? What do such changes do to our memories, our sense of pastness, our conceptions of history, the present and future? Such issues and questions, pertinent back in postmodernism, still resonate today in their relevance to the citizen or subject addressed, interpolated and integrated into the de-centred world of the internet. The attachment of a specific community to their 'visual culture' or the freedom to drift from one set of pictures and meanings to another, to inhabit different identities, from one to another, means that we still need a critical theory to address the different practices of photography in the spheres that we may now struggle to define as public or private. The interaction of pictures and space is such that the old boundaries of public and private are no longer the same, not disappeared, but merely moved, reconfigured and re-temporalized in the screen memories that illuminate today's everyday life.

The contemporary cultural interest in memory, 'who we are', is symptomatic of the vertigo felt by these cultural transformations of the past decades. Ironically the age of the *after* is also a hyperconsciousness of what happened before. In the period of the 'after', it appears there is almost no future. Popular cinema and fiction are full of dystopian stories: the aftermath of global disaster, a destroyed eco-system of planet earth, automated robots and new viruses. Even exploration of 'outer space' is an anxiety of loss, separation or infection by another horrible species (or viruses generated on earth). 'Revenge' for what happened in the past is also a dominant temporal trope. Wherever you look, the future imagination looks back or is bleak. No redemption in any theological or ontological sense for the human, or post-human in the Anthropocene, and no post-capitalist vision except catastrophe and smiling elites. It seems like the time of the human species is plagued by its own technological structures and creations. Photography itself is haunted by a previous version of itself, now called the 'analogue' world of photography, ransacked for what remnants of it can be recycled and reused today. If this is not a symptom of the post-modern status of the contemporary condition, I do not know what is. Modernism is over, not because people have given up their subscriptions, but because it had grounded its narrative and universal foundation of its meaning on the future as progress. The avant-gardes abolished the past in the name of the future and were always future-orientated. They were founded and started as a degree zero from which the future would emanate, even if it was a deathly image of undoing the ideal ego image. Today the conception of the 'post' and the 'after' is the bitter pleasure of emotions in looking back at the past. The future, as such, is apocalyptic and lacks imagination of beyond. Certainly, the species can plan to leave

the planet or even its own bio-organ bodies for plasma, but it cannot escape itself when 'the future' imagination as such disappears beyond the micro-narratives of survival. In this sense, the 'contemporary' in contemporary culture is also looking back, living *within* its kaleidoscope past. Photography is intimately bound up with these processes and transformations and implicated in the questions of its memory. The question remains what *is* the impact of photographic images on cultural memory and individual consciousness?

This book began with a general question: what happened to photography 'after' postmodernism? It is a question often asked by those interested in contemporary photography debates, whether it is about photography as art, the global flow of photographic images, the internet or new ways of using the 'photographic' across personal and public life. There is a sense that the theories developed prior to postmodernism do not 'fit' the world of images that we live in today. If the book does not fully answer these questions and issues, its aim is nevertheless certainly to work towards them.

David Bate
London, UK

Notes

- 1 Fredric Jameson, *Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 93.
- 2 Jean Laplanche, 'Notes on Afterwardness', *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 3 Useful examples include Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (London: W.W. Norton, 2008), and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography after Photography* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).
- 4 See Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, ed. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion, 2015).
- 5 See for example the collected essays (a standard textbook on photography courses in the UK for many years): Roland Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977). For a general introduction to Barthes's work see Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 6 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage Classics, 2000).
- 7 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 98.
- 8 As Sara Ahmed puts it in her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the 'sociality of emotions' is a crucial component: emotions 'produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects'. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 10.
- 9 This book is also a very different project from *Camera Lucida* as will be seen.
- 10 See Roland Barthes, 'Proust et la photographie', *Recherche de Proust* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).
- 11 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*' (*Representations*, no 26, Spring 1989), 8.
- 12 Nora, 'Between Memory and History', 14.
- 13 In the UK, for example, a whole range of new arts and photography groups were pioneered in the 1980s from various independent working-class, black, gay, feminist and other labour organizations, and social groups were formed using photography, video and film. See for example Stuart Hall, 'Reconstruction Work', *Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s* (Tèn.8, Vol 2, no 3, Spring 1992).
- 14 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 90.

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SCREEN

INCORPORATING SCREEN EDUCATION



CINDY SHERMAN'S FILM STILLS

FIGURE 1.1 *Screen* film theory journal cover (with detail of Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still 21*), 1983. Photograph by the author.

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AFTER POSTMODERNISM?

Has anybody else noticed? Where did it go, is it hiding somewhere? Have you seen it? Postmodernism, once the ‘bee’s knees’ of cultural theory and art criticism, has more-or-less vanished. Once upon a time, someone only had to say ‘postmodernism’ for people to either run as far away as possible in fear and loathing, or rush adoringly towards its feet. Fashion certainly is fickle. From the heyday of postmodernism in the 1980s and early 1990s, all that is left now is dusty books and fading bibliographies. No doubt someone somewhere is still talking about ‘postmodernism’ (or teaching on it), but who is interested in it now? This is not a negative point to make. My point is not that postmodernism was or is irrelevant but that its disappearance from cultural theory is significant because it raises the question about what concept or concepts have formed in its place. In other words, the question is *why* has it disappeared and what thinking, if any, has replaced it? On what basis might current photography and visual arts theory and criticism be practised? Or is it that *nothing* has replaced it? Is theory no longer important at all? After the end of the Soviet Union and the growth of global capitalism could it be that we are living in the first ideology-free world? Are we now living in an ideological vacuum, so that we do not need any theory? Is that possible? Is an end to the discussion of postmodernism indicative of the end of ideology?¹

Just because an ideology does not name itself, it does not mean that it does not exist. It may simply be that we have not yet managed to give a name to this condition of after postmodern. If this is the case, that we are in a condition that is ‘after’ postmodernism, what name can we give it? Of course, *any* theory and the point of it is going to be transient, eventually destined to be another ‘ism’, fading into the background as another problematic emerges and the older one is consigned to the bottom of the tool kit once its use-value is exhausted. It is thus useful to remember

here that postmodernism itself originally came into use to discuss what had been a new problematic.

Postmodernism became a valuable critical concept because it identified something that people were experiencing but which did not then have a name. As often, the artists were early birds. 'Postmodernism' was thus partly a project to write and think how culture was being re-defined.² It has a specific resonance here because it involved the preoccupations of a certain type of photographic culture.³ In so far as these debates affected photography and its critics, some were admittedly tedious; the discussions primarily involved issues relating to photography as art and, even more tediously, art as photography. The issues at stake in the 'pomo' debates were broader, more fundamental and far-reaching than simply those that preoccupied the art theory of the 1980s, its rejection of modernism. How to quickly define what these arguments were?

The idea that 'we' (whoever the 'we' is remains contentious) are *modern* is a characteristic of every age. Western culture in particular has long been driven by the idea of constant progress and change as a positive value (Enlightenment and capitalism), even if there are those who have always opposed it. The idea of modernity is based on a process of constant progress. What appeared to be thrown out of the window in postmodernism was an ideology of *originality*; the 'original' new was rejected and replaced by the concepts of 'reference' and 'quotation'. So, to be '*post-modern*' meant, in one respect, a temporary end to the ideology of the new. The idea of finding something *authentic* and *original* was discarded. Instead, 'newness' in postmodernism was primarily regarded as the product of recombining one or more different elements from within existing culture. 'Mixing', was not just something to be done on turntables in nightclubs, but to styles of architecture, music, food, furniture, and genres of film and photography. 'Newness' came through a referencing together, a hybridity of bits from various existing cultural elements that were usually separate. Thus, an image (then called a 'text') had to use, quote or refer to other 'texts'. While this was an old social process (one that the cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had long ago defined as *bricolage*⁴), to be *post-modern* you had to wear your 'intertextual reference' on your sleeve for all to see.⁵

Thus, to give an example, we can see how Cindy Sherman became a key figure in this respect of postmodern reference. Sherman's early work referred exclusively to the imagery of trashy Hollywood films (of which there have been many). Of course, much art has traditionally been dependent on reference to other previous 'texts', but this was about situating your work within a historical tradition of great artists (sic). That was simply where you started, but in postmodernism the reference was almost to anything other than art, primarily from popular culture (a tendency shared by avant-garde artists at the beginning of the twentieth century⁶). Cleverly, Sherman's famous early photographs were captioned as: *Untitled Film Stills*.



FIGURE 1.2 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still 21*, 1978.

The word ‘*Untitled*’ indicates that you can give them any meaning, while ‘*Film Still* no...’ instills the notion that the image does indeed refer to an actual specific existing film (Hollywood ‘B movies’ in Sherman’s early work). In short: ‘here is a picture from a film, but I am not going to tell you which one’, a message complicated by the fact that the photographs were not actual films stills. This was ‘intertextuality’ in action. In this semiotic game, the audience is given a reference that spirals off to yet another representation, not to ‘reality’ itself. And, even worse, for the opponents of such works, the reference to other images often came from trashy ‘mass culture’, elevating it into the realms of ‘high art’, even if it was to criticize it. The *difference* between this and modernism must be obvious: modernist art defined itself by bracketing its forms off from explicit reference to mass culture. (Even the 1930s photography critic Walter Benjamin, who was so positive about the then new mass cultural forms of photography and film, took the advice of his fiercest critic Theodor Adorno to remove the section on Mickey Mouse from the second edition of his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* because of the damage it would do to his argument.⁷) In contrast to this, within postmodernism it was imperative to interlace a high-cultural text with popular cultural references.⁸

In essence, then, the culture of ‘postmodernism’ was a name given to this apparently ‘new’ phenomenon of representations coming into existence by more or less explicit reference to other representations, not to any first order reality. It was like that sometimes dizzying experience of looking up a word in a dictionary, only to find its meaning referred to an equally unfamiliar word that you then have to look up, which in turn refers you to yet another unfamiliar term and so on. Postmodern culture enjoyed this play with signs of never-ending reference, where the more you played the less anyone seemed to know what reality it was touching, as they once imagined it had. The theory of postmodernism was that these types of process and strategy had also reached mass culture in epidemic proportions, such that we had all lost touch with what we thought reality to be. With the (then) new art photography of Cindy Sherman, the fact that she appeared in her own pictures, albeit always as ‘someone else’, meant that there was nevertheless a clear rule for the game. The pictures were always anchored, as it were, to her, as ‘Cindy Sherman’, even if we could never know who she ‘really was’.⁹ Thus her identity was contingent, always subject to a flow of images, whose already mediated presence merely increased the sense that a real identity is ‘lost’ in (post)modern culture. (Such arguments could create a veritable panic among social groups based on a single image identity, e.g., certain class, sex or ethnic group politics.) But the real fear about postmodern culture was that there was no longer any anchor to reality at all, that ‘reality’ had disappeared into an endless chain of other representations. The root causes of these changes, or indeed, if these really were real changes at all, were highly contested.

For Marxist critics, postmodern culture was either a reflection of changes in the economic model of capitalism (i.e., the ‘late capitalism’ system argument by Fredric Jameson¹⁰) or conceived of as a conspiracy by semioticians and poststructuralists to

avoid real class politics (Terry Eagleton¹¹). In feminism, postmodernism could be read as a fracture in the master narrative of white male privilege, and as liberation, or at least, a celebration of feminine *jouissance*, with all its attendant 'trouble' to the law of patriarchy and orthodox modes of masculine pleasure.¹²

Jean-François Lyotard, whose book *The Postmodern Condition* initiated much of the postmodern debates (for which Fredric Jameson wrote the preface to the book), was more socially nuanced, and drew together different strands of argument about changes in technology, capitalism, languages, knowledge and power. *The Postmodern Condition* is still worth reading today.¹³ Lyotard's key argument is that the social 'metanarrative' by which European-based Enlightenment values of progress had been pursued by Western culture, what he called the 'grand narrative', had 'lost its credibility'.¹⁴ Lyotard argued that the motivating metanarrative for knowledge in postmodern culture is the legitimization of power, not emancipation. The role of language and performativity in this pursuit was crucial, he argued, as is the 'disorientating upsurge of technology' and its 'impact on the status of knowledge'.¹⁵ The rise of technocratic industry, the 'generalised computerisation of society' and its effects on knowledge, were also essential factors.¹⁶ At one point Lyotard says: 'The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games.'¹⁷

In contrast, Jürgen Habermas, a key figure in the tradition of Frankfurt school criticism, saw this 'postmodern' thesis as an attack (both cultural and theoretical) on the very values of modernity.¹⁸ In some ways this seemed partly true if you considered the culture of art in modernity. The sudden emergent postmodern success of, for example, women artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherry Levine (all from the 'Pictures generation' as they are now called¹⁹) and others, plus the inclusion of ethnic artists in major shows, meant that 'postmodern art' seemed like a 'return of the repressed' of those excluded from modernism, that is, a predominantly white male dominated modernist arts scene. A chorus voice of 'others' was now not only apparently being voiced, but also heard and performed.²⁰ Moreover, many of these new artists were using photography and other popular cultural forms like video, graphic design or left-over trash, 'quoted' from TV shows or advertising, rather than traditional painting and sculpture. Yet, whether all this was what postmodernism really meant, was in dispute. Habermas insisted that modernity as a project was not over, it had not ended. Elsewhere, Jean Baudrillard's theoretical writings obviously cut across these different tendencies with his own 'postmodern' strategies of writing (use of irony, parody, pastiche, satire), so ambivalent that no one quite knew exactly 'what he really thinks'.²¹

For cultural conservatives, postmodern culture was the destruction of important distinctions within society about what was good, 'high' culture (classical music, theatre, painting, literature) and what was not: 'low' culture (pop music, television, photography, video, tabloids and celebrity magazines, etc). The emergence of new uses of photography in art only enhanced this view. Postmodernist culture was shocking.²² Even the implicitly accepted institutional boundaries of advertising photography appeared in danger of being breached when the clothing company

Benetton started to disrupt the usual values and protocols of the advertising image as an idealized world. They changed their strategy, buying instead the 'real' serious photojournalist photographs of urgent social or political events to put in magazines and on billboards advertising their clothing.



FIGURE 1.3 United Colors of Benetton, 1992 billboard advertisement. Photograph by David Bate.

The 'lack of sincerity' already institutionalized in advertising imagery (with the notable exception of charity campaigns) was broken. It meant that Benetton had suspiciously broken with the assumed expectations of audiences and their tacit complicity with the rules and fantasy values of advertising in general. Everyone knows that advertising depicts an idealized and painless future world, a veritable paradise of orgasmic pleasure, when even a headache or stomach pain is cured. Benetton and others transgressed these assumptions.

Many such examples across culture could be found, where the accepted values about photography in an institution were breached by what can be call 'genre-switching', where the values of one institutional genre were substituted for another genre or form of image, one *not* usually associated with that institution (i.e., a genre usually seen as irrelevant, indifferent or ethically opposite to that institution). *Genre-switching* was used to pull the rug out from under the viewer's feet. This type of traffic in photographic codes between and across institutions was read as the symptom of a spiralling instability of meanings across those institutions that mediate the world to us.²³

The examples I have given, and the many others, were only the tip of a larger iceberg. Increasingly, it seemed, postmodern culture was leaving behind 'reality' proper for a mediatized world. That is to say, postmodern culture was characterized as an environment of frenzied inter-textual reference (now epitomized by the internet), where you can spend days without ever returning to where you started. It is a space where what you experience and see reported are things that can be as real or as meaningful as you choose (or not) to believe. Whether or not such claims were exaggerated has never been resolved, since the argument over them has long since disappeared along with the notion of postmodernism itself (and now long since lost optimism about new 'cyberculture').

What has happened in photography practice and its theory and criticism since then? Has postmodernism been replaced with, if anything, something else? Has the enjoyment of photographic artifice dwindled? Has the tendency to explicitly refer to other media texts disappeared? Has genre-switching vanished? Are those postmodern strategies, issues and attitudes still valid? If art has been a crucial site for such debates we might, symptomatically, begin there.

Consider a local instance: the first major photography exhibition at the Tate Modern Museum in London in 2003 called *Cruel and Tender*. Curiously, none of the celebrated photo-artists from postmodernism were included, even though the exhibition looked back at the twentieth century. Symptomatically, the exhibition was subtitled: *The Real in the Twentieth Century Photograph*.²⁴ Basically, the exhibition demonstrates two key traditions of 'art photography', one German, emanating from August Sander, the other American, from Walker Evans, whose style was itself derived from Eugene Atget and Sander.²⁵ (A few English, European and African photographers were also included to balance the books.) What both these 'origins' and most of the other works in the exhibition had in common, despite their *particular* differences, was a concern with 'descriptive' photography.²⁶ It is thus Walker Evans who is really the central figure in the exhibition, not only because he admired and borrowed from Atget and August Sander (his frontal compositions and editing techniques), but because Evans's work also encompasses the breadth and range of most of the other subsequent types of photography in the exhibition. The photographs of Walker Evans (1903–1975) are not only 'descriptive', but they are also *eclectic* in style and subject matter. Look across his photographs and you can see an insistent interest on the everyday, the 'vernacular', the ordinary things in life that epitomize existence: shop fronts, shoes, tools, bedrooms, street signs and so on. Having visited Paris in 1926–1927 and becoming fluent in French, Evans absorbed the cult habits of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, the street observer, wandering on a whim, a practice that he took back to the USA and incorporated into his own 'brutal' type of photography.²⁷ Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert and the photographs of Eugene Atget were among his early passions in Paris. What interested Walker Evans, he once confessed to himself in 1935, was something 'a little bit shocking; brutal'. Using a slightly harsh light, which gives harshness to the objects in it, Evans's photography suggests a kind of inner harshness to reality. Whatever it is, people, buildings, spaces, objects, words or any combination of these, he

photographed them in a ‘cruel and tender’ manner. Indeed, the main title *Cruel and Tender* is borrowed from a 1938 review of Walker Evans photographs. Thus, in the exhibition, Walker Evans stands as a kind of prototype or template model photographer for the more contemporary descriptive photography, like Andreas Gursky, whose work was also in the *Cruel and Tender* exhibition.

Clement Greenberg, the main art theorist usually cited in debates on modernism, was challenged by a member of his audience in a 1987 discussion to qualify his earlier (‘American’) modernist views on art photography.²⁸ Greenberg admitted he never figured out what it is that made a good photograph (the technique, the subject, the process, etc.), but, reiterating his earlier views written in 1946, he still preferred the photography of Walker Evans to that of Edward Weston. Greenberg prefers Walker Evans because his work grasps an ‘instantaneity’, unlike Weston whose work for Greenberg lacks interest in subject matter and ‘concentrated too much attention on the medium’.²⁹

We can take as an example the photograph of ‘Floyd Burroughs’ Work Shoes’ by Walker Evans reproduced in Fredric Jameson’s essay on postmodern culture, as an example of ‘realist pathos’.³⁰ The picture ‘Floyd Burroughs’ Work Shoes, Hale County, Alabama, 1936’ has a gritty feeling. The boots resound in their ‘objectness’. The deep black circles, where someone’s legs should be, accentuates their absence to create the impending presence of their owner. The photograph is emphatically and empathetically realist. Compare with this a photograph by Edward Weston taken a year later, ‘Shoes from Abandoned Soda Works, Owens Valley, 1937’. It is not hard to see that one is ‘realist’, the other ‘modernist’ in aesthetic form.



FIGURE 1.4 Walker Evans, ‘Floyd Burroughs’ Work Shoes, 1936’. From James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*.



FIGURE 1.5 ‘Shoes from Abandoned Soda Works, Owens Valley, 1937’. Photograph by Edward Weston. Collection Center for Creative Photography © Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents.

Edward Weston’s picture very differently flattens the boots, makes them merge in with the ground. The deep focus creates a lack of depth and reduces the distinction between the object and the ground, making a visual emphasis in the picture

of 'flatness'. One can argue this flatness creates a visual link between boots and the ground, as a 'oneness' so that the discarded boots become a sign of the discarded worker (and soda factory indicated in the caption). The compression of shoe to the ground can also be read as a sign of the destiny of us all to return to the earth in death. However, this flatness of the image also links the picture to formalist aesthetics (a theory of form over content and meaning). It is easy to see why Greenberg would prefer Walker Evans's pictures, they point to what Greenberg thought photography specifically did best: to represent things, objects, people, as little anecdotes. (The 'flatness' emphasized in Weston's photograph is what Greenberg saw as the essential quality of the medium of painting, thus Weston was imitating painting and not true to his medium.) The work of Walker Evans, its 'realist pathos' and anecdotal 'instantaneity' are at the core of the argument.

So we find, strangely, that the thesis of a contemporary art photography exhibition at the Tate Modern also supports Clement Greenberg's taste in 'art photography'. Both choose Walker Evans as a key reference figure for contemporary art photography.³¹ Whether or not this indicates a return of the values of modernism (the straight 'pure' photograph) in contemporary art photography, it nevertheless pointed to a shift in photography towards the *descriptive* image based in *originality* and *actuality* – precisely all the modernist and realist attributes strongly rejected by postmodernism. The photographs by Walker Evans and much of the work in the *Cruel and Tender* exhibition bring us to a renewed interest in photographic description as 'expressive realism'.³² The photographs by Walker Evans are, Greenberg remarks, 'anecdotal'. We might say they are cruel or painful anecdotes, but that is to exaggerate their effect on us today. Yet there is something in that exhibition that is indicative of what emerged to replace the problematic of postmodernism. Let me try and give an example of what I mean.

Each Walker Evans photograph, no matter how fabulous in its presentation of ordinariness, is usually presented as within a series, as a 'poignant' part of the whole. Every picture is a fragment, a metonym, a small anecdote that contributes to an accumulated whole, evidence of life 'itself'. Of course the conventions of photographic realism have developed since the time of Walker Evans. The technological means of producing, for example, Andreas Gursky's large-scale colour photographs, often several metres long, were simply not available when Walker Evans started photography. Yet a similar structure of obvious and obtuse description operates across them, despite all the technological and social historical differences between Evans and others since.³³ What they all share (with different techniques of course) is 'awesome' description. The effect of these anecdotal descriptions is primarily to evince reality through the photographic surface of 'here it is' and 'this is how it is'. The picture throws at the audience a defiant description where the sheer accumulation of detail actually inhibits the communication of a specific message. This emphasis on description is itself an age-old rhetorical device, here advanced within photographic discourse. It is what, in relation to the literature of realism, Roland Barthes termed the 'reality effect' of description: a 'referential illusion'.³⁴ The 'absolute detail' of descriptive strategies in a legal or even poetic sense of literature aims to emit a kind

of presence of reality, and it is hardly different in photography. Descriptive photographs work in a similar way, the effect being as if to speak 'facts'. Like someone who describes something endlessly (in either a boring or interesting manner), they force insistently the presence of the thing described (and themselves of course) onto their audience. This is the rhetoric of description, the accumulation of details to create the real of the referent, as Roland Barthes called it, the 'reality effect'.³⁵ What you take away from the descriptive picture, what it does to you, is not so much the connotations of a specific message, but the pictorial effect of contemplation without meaning, or rather, meaning as a certain type of emptiness.

This is different from the rhetorical culture of postmodernism and its textual irony, parody, pastiche and allegory, all techniques associated with the baroque. The frenetic mixing and semiotic activism of postmodern culture meant that meaning was crucial, disruptive, challenging, and even divisive. This itself faded and the 'what is there', the 'presence' gained in contemplation of a photograph returned to a primary place during the 1990s. In place of a 'fast' surface culture, a slower art, more concerned with a reality effect in epic display emerged and not just in the visual arts. Take the 'reality television' programme *Big Brother* and its subsequent many derivatives since as an obvious example: who could have imagined that there would be huge audiences – millions – who would watch groups of young volunteers (and fading celebrities) self-voluntarily locked down in totalitarian type institutional environments (closed surveillance houses, jungles, etc.) for a quasi-psychology experiment. A cruel and tender spectacle indeed. (George Orwell may well have found this '1984' totalized world *as entertainment* an incredulous display.) The whole *construction* of a reality for the camera so it can be edited and described is to insist on the realism of its display and its display as realism. No reality without representation is certainly true here. The spectator languishes in the semiotic descriptions of ordinary lives, endless insignificant events and anecdotes; for some, the tedium of common existence. The main function and novelty of the filming is not, in fact (as the chatter of its critics would have it), 'character assassination', but to produce a reality as though this is 'as it really is'. (*Realism*: aims to make reality certain without interrogating its means of production.) The more an audience watches, and this is one of the features of such productions, the *time of contemplation*, the more the anecdotes and detailed descriptions and actions of people become real. This was the turn in contemporary culture away from 'postmodernism' towards representational rules of certainty and a newer kind of 'realism'. These renewed phenomena may well also account for the recent interest in cruelty.

Cruelty, pain and violent images have certainly been a topic on people's minds. It is not only Susan Sontag's 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (a book more obviously related to the political/ethical issues of war photography in the light of 9/11) that started to ask questions about what photographs do to their audiences.³⁶ The reality effect of photographs has emerged in a far wider field as ethical questions about what we 'watch'. Is it perhaps the *effect* of the proliferation of new realisms and their aesthetic values that are now experienced by spectators as cruelty inflicted upon them?

Of course, it can be said that cruelty has always been involved in realism, and not just as subject matter. Realism, as an aesthetic experience, positions the spectator outside the work as a 'witness' or observer and not as a participant. This relationship is crucial. The viewer is put in the position of a passive viewer rather than an active role. As a witness, the viewer is powerless in relation to the events that pass by them, only given to testimony, a monocular view like the camera itself, whose position they are given to occupy. Obviously, knowledge arising from such forms of seeing can invoke power or be converted to it. Yet, 'witnessing' is also the classic characteristic position of the voyeur, whose pleasure is given in *looking*, absorbed by its objects and events, participating in them at a level of imagination and fantasy. (The imagination of 'I am there', as being at the scene and the fantasy actions of 'what I can do' there.) Seeing becomes an activity in its own right, caught between pain and pleasure in a kind of sublime rhetorical dichotomy. The viewer is both connected to the event and divorced from it. These processes are largely invisible because of their resistance to language, located somewhere 'between perception and consciousness'.³⁷ The so-called 'linguistic turn' of poststructuralism was itself an attempt to address this lacuna in visual theory, to show how an image is always a network of signifiers rather than an isolated object. Much the same could be said about the process of the individual who is individuated and 'subjectified' in culture. Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* wrote:

A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be.³⁸

This is why, published just after Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Roland Barthes's book *Camera Lucida* suddenly became a canonical text for photography. While Barthes did not specifically deny the social-semiotic functions of photographs (to which his earlier work had contributed so much in specific analytic techniques) the argument in *Camera Lucida* recognized and welcomed the whole weight of private emotions involved in the network of signifiers that constitute the image. Barthes's book legitimated the way the field of the 'personal' might be invested in an image. As a result, this personal aspect in the act of looking, the pain, pleasure and desire invoked in photographic realism, cut into the existing academic discourse of 'theory' (which had worked so hard to constitute photography as a social, political and historical entity central to the modern formation of social-sexual and cultural identity) like a hot knife through butter. Theories of communication in photography subsequently congealed under the weight of the subjective as 'personal' criticism.

While photography theory and history retreated from many of these questions and problems (or even obliterated them in the name of 'personal criticism'), photographic practices themselves have not. Poststructuralism diagnosed what postmodernism showed: on the one hand, an emergent nostalgia for presence,



FIGURE 1.6 Andreas Gursky, *Untitled V*, 1997.

the use of the past, often as mixed fragments (now renamed as the 'archival turn'), on the other, a desire to construct something new and unrepresented, found in the remnants of the contemporary day.

A visual work from art photography can be an instructive example here: Andreas Gursky's large panoramic photograph, *Untitled V* (1997), one of his first very large-scale photographs. Andreas Gursky's 1997 art photograph presents the scene of a retail store display of trainers, featuring Nike footwear.³⁹ Almost two hundred shoes in the minimalist display insist their presence in the mind of the spectator.⁴⁰ At over four metres long the photograph is impressive. It competes more-or-less with the vast scale of abstract modernist canvases earlier in the twentieth century or the old European tradition of history painting and the pictorial traditions dating back to the Renaissance of large-scale art.⁴¹ Yet, Gursky's photograph, offers a large photographic depiction that addresses the social world of shopping, a monument to contemporary consumer culture. The abstract display of shoes focuses exclusively on the 'ideal beauty' of a shop display spectacle, offered to the global consumer. In much the way modernist art often removed 'social context' from its content and environment, Gursky's photograph shows that the space of social consumption does this too.

The photographic 'realism' here is not in the service of emancipation or the market (although arguments could be made for either of these interpretations), but resolutely describes to the viewer a spectacle of capitalist choice. Nike footwear are set within a series, each trainer/shoe shown as a discrete individual object located within the vast glossy white display case. The picture is not an advertisement for shoes, usually objectified as singular, a promise of individualism to the viewer and potential consumer. Here, we are impressed by the 'awesome' capacity of photographic description, the nightmare of choice amid the delight of visual display, which triggers our imaginary sensory response to the subject matter. Having passed through the 'transparency' of the photograph, the spectacle of information is reflected back on the spectator. If the spectator feels the awe (the 'awesome' choice) in the picture and, then, catches themselves feeling a slight hollowness, the emptiness of the commodity (fetish), the vacuous work that has gone into something so 'trivial' as trainers, then the picture is working. The emphatic scale of the photograph in the gallery gives it an obvious emphasis of grandness and importance, which means the subject matter is (or should be) important too. Yet, all this spectacle for what? For a choice of footwear? The vast scale of the photograph and its detail means that the spectator of the photograph can walk back and forth looking at each or every element, should they so desire, or stand back and admire (or be horrified, outraged) at the whole scene. The work of meaning alternates between the image as a picture and its social references.

At the time that Gursky made *Untitled V* in 1997, anti-Nike protests had become more common and reported in international media. Nike was the subject of controversial 'sweatshop' accusations about the conditions of workers in factories making its products in Asia (e.g. Cambodia, Pakistan) and even accusations on child labour.⁴² Based in Oregon, USA, the Nike company was one of many large global

brands that has its products outsourced to others; mostly made in factories in poor countries around the globe – some with alleged human rights abuses of its workforce (forced overtime, breaches in health and safety conditions, and so on).⁴³ Nike was also one of the USA companies associated with new marketing technique: of making ‘brands, not products’.⁴⁴ Advertising campaigns at the time innovatively included African American youth and global minorities. Nike built a brand by promoting an ‘identity image’, primarily through photographic visuality in advertising, advertorials, infotainment and use of sub-culture codes. Naomi Klein, in her book *No Logo*, wrote cynically that Nike ‘realized that people who saw themselves as belonging to oppressed groups were ready-made market niches: throw a few liberal platitudes their way and, presto, you’re not just a product but an ally in the struggle’.⁴⁵ It was indeed members of these groups who had begun to make actual protests at ‘NikeTown’ shops in Europe and the USA, with these corporate image branding campaigns seen and used to promote ‘identity politics’ as a marketing strategy. By 1997, Naomi Klein observes, Nike were engaged in an ‘image war’.

We can see how the so-called neutral or ‘innocent’ description of a Nike display in Gursky’s picture, with its multiplicity of a global brand’s footwear products (manufactured in different parts of the world) might participate in multiple networks of signifiers in specific different communication circuits, from the obvious pleasure in shopping to obtuse images of suffering and horror; and even beyond, to the paradoxes of photography in postmodernity.⁴⁶

In the Museum of Modern Art’s catalogue for Andreas Gursky’s show in New York, it is made very clear in the introductory essay by Peter Galassi that this specific artwork, *Untitled V*, is a composite picture from six negatives of the same section of shelf. Gursky shot the same shelf with different footwear placed on it for each shot and then stitched them together on a computer.⁴⁷ Despite this attempt to pull the ontological rug of certainty away from the viewer with his text, the pictorial illusion of it as one long shelf remains convincingly ‘solid’, as far as any shop display ultimately is. Despite being digitally composed, Gursky’s photograph nevertheless does not betray the usual logic of ontological certainty of photographic meaning. Indeed, it is certainly not as the ‘proof’ of a referent that Gursky’s picture works; it provides no testimony to reality or even the reality of a shop. The picture presents, with great abstract verisimilitude, the artfulness (or artlessness?) of a commodity display and the artifice of photography itself.

The historical problem of this contemporary space of reverie and wonder is that we no longer know whether the signification processes we engage in are actually the product of our mind or the product – like a corporate brand – already *in* our minds. After postmodernism it is difficult to separate the mediatized sphere from our own psyche. The distinction between social processes and subjective reality is often impossible to draw. The panorama of the ‘empty’ choice offered to the consumer highlights the doubt, the feeble certainty that contemporary commodity societies offer us in their image-world culture. The connection of suffering here is again not in the subject matter of the picture (painful as it may be for some to look at a picture of Nike shoes in an art gallery), but in the way the spectator

is excluded from the scene: we have no social place here except to contemplate our role as a consumer. You and I are offered the same contemplation of trainer 'choice'. Gursky's picture plays with this situation, acknowledging both the real world of the commodity and the world of 'opportunity' it offers to the imaginary of the spectator. The picture opens a place of wonder, a space of doubt, a context for reverie and social reality.

The example can be expanded tenfold to any other image in circulation today. The suspicion of disbelief hangs over photography like no time before. Anyone with a smartphone knows how easy it is to 'manipulate' the way we see something: move the phone here and you see it that way, turn it around and you see something else, and so on. Moreover, sophisticated computing techniques mean that a 'photographic' image can be produced from within a computer without any need for actual material 'reality' outside the computer. The 'that-has-been' of the photograph becomes a digital effect. Yet the materiality of *any* photograph is not only a question of the technique of its production, its form (or format), but of its engagement with matter itself as an image, as the substance of its meaning. In other words, despite all the suspicions and deception or illusion or artifice – even of a smartphone – the image itself *matters* as the material reality of its effect.

We might recognize here the same paradoxical loss of faith in things featured in *The Postmodern Condition*, named there by Jean-François Lyotard as the 'delegitimation' and loss of 'credibility' of the Enlightenment 'grand narratives'.⁴⁸ We carry on with narratives of reason, emancipation or 'progress', even if the faith in them is lost or damaged or shaken. New counter-narratives appear, often from margins with new convictions as contributions to the very fragmentation they seek to overturn. Hegemonic struggle notwithstanding, it is to the multiplicity of plural narratives, different identity formations and subject positions that the photographic image itself contributes in specific processes of individuation. Just as photographic images have been central to the establishment of nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'grand narratives' of, for instance, sovereign national identities, photography now also contributes to their fragmentation in multiple narratives of 'minimal selves'.⁴⁹

While postmodern theory asserted that reality is mediated via representations (language, images, myths), as 'already represented', then realism in contrast had insisted on a direct and unmediated access to reality. Does not a 'return of the real' discourse mean the end of the 'postmodern'?⁵⁰ What we have to realize is that the type of discourse about the return of the real is not something that followed after postmodernism (as a subsequent chronological historical moment), but as an explicit aesthetic response within it.⁵¹

Postmodernism, as a theoretical debate about culture, was the struggle to recognize, one way or another, these massive shifts and their cultural consequences if not the full impact of the overflow of pictures and textual messages across the many systems and structures for disseminating them and, crucially, their effects on (and in) the human subject itself. While 'postmodernism' can be seen in retrospect as an explicit recognition of these specific developments (often too hastily rejected

as simply a celebration of the eclectic signifier over a signified), the return to the question of realism must be seen as internal to it. In other words, to return to questions of the real in postmodernity and contemporary capitalist culture is a question about the aesthetic regimes and global forms that support it. If we are to follow Barthes here to the emotional *affect* of the personal (the *punctum*) in the social image, as part of living in photography, it is to the different subjective and objective temporalities to which photography subjects us in culture that we must turn.

Jean-François Lyotard had put it:

In the conflict surrounding the word *communication*, it is understood that the work, or at any rate anything which is received as art, induces a feeling – before inducing an understanding – which, constitutively and therefore immediately, is universally communicable, by definition. ... This, in my view, is what governs our problematic of ‘new technologies and art’, or, put differently, ‘art and postmodernity’.⁵²

In this framework, photography occupies a specific privileged place, a vast modern technological network of pervasive images throughout and beyond people’s private and public lives. If individuals and images are nodes within complex networks, they are now also overlain by another one, the ‘digital network’. It is thus no coincidence that, while Jean-François Lyotard is writing this argument, and making a distinction between ‘understanding’ and inducing a ‘feeling’, Roland Barthes had already in *Camera Lucida* moved towards this return of the unpresented ‘real’ in a photograph. There in *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes records the effects of living with mass photography, and comes up with the notion of the *punctum* as an effect of the *real* beyond the social meaning, what he calls the *studium* of mass photography. In so doing, Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* renovates the issue of what pictures do to their spectators, whether knowingly or not, regardless of the social origins of the photograph. Barthes and Lyotard, in very different registers, recognize the weight of these micro-narratives in social processes. The question for photography theory and history now is how to respond to the explosion of human narrative, social fantasy and memory bubbles triggered in photographic forms, and of course, to understand their consequences. In this scenario, photographic realism was not abolished, but interned to the conditions of presentation that had belonged to and been previously reserved for painting: the pictorial tableau.

Notes

- 1 Although this is not the place to expound on it, the last structuralist attempt to theorize on ideology, in the work of Louis Althusser, the ‘Althusserian’ position would have to be re-addressed by the arguments of Ernesto Laclau. In short, ideology would not be a ‘misrecognition’ of social reality by human subjects, but, as Laclau puts it, ‘would consist of those discursive forms through which a society tries to insinuate itself as such on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences’. See Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London:

Verso, 1990), 92. As I will argue later: It is, perhaps, precisely the lack of closure in the discourses of post-modernism that made them unsustainable in cultural criticism; witness the way that 'postmodernism' is thrown about as a term of abuse in the public domain by critics who use it a synonym for anything indecisive or 'open-ended'.

- 2 The extent to which postmodernism was a 'first-world' problem, relating to highly industrialized media-dominated societies was rarely addressed. The discourse of 'globalization' or mondialization that replaced postmodernist debates pointed to both the limits of postmodernism and the horizon of thought about its solution. Both of these debates became marginal to photography criticism and theory. Photographic discourse turned instead towards the new mass media internet photography, photography as art, or a wholesale return to romantic criticism and modernist aesthetics.
See, for example, Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, eds, *Postmodernism and Japan* (London: Duke University Press, 1989), Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds, *The Cultures of Globalization* (London: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 3 The many texts are far too numerous to all list here now; however, some of the key texts for art, culture and photography from the time were: Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1986). The general key founding text was Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) and Fredric Jameson's landmark essay 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 146, 1984.
- 4 On bricolage, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- 5 This may not have been the specific meaning intended by Julia Kristeva's use of the term in her original work on it in 1967, but it is certainly how it ended up being used. For an introduction to the topic see *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, edited by Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), and Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
- 6 The avant-garde movements of Dada and surrealism, for example, drew on popular culture and re-configured them within other references. See Andreas Huyssen, 'The Hidden Dialectic: Avant-garde—Technology—Mass Culture', *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1986).
- 7 The reference to Mickey Mouse was apparently withdrawn from the second version of his essay on the advice of Adorno. See Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology', *New German Critique*, no 40 (Winter 1987), 222.
- 8 We might consider this to be the reverse tendency, a return of the favour to cultural theory, which since the late 1950s had begun to subject the new popular cultural forms to a high-cultural theory critique. From Roland Barthes's 1950s *Mythologies* to the later new cultural figures of 1990s critique, such as Slavoj Žižek, for example; and even Terry Eagleton (who increasingly became hostile to 'postmodernism') began to treat popular culture as the material for serious theoretical work. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Granada, 1972), Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (London: MIT Press, 1991) and Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2003).
- 9 Some reviewers, mainly men, fell into the trap of this work and tried to identify the 'real' Cindy Sherman. See the excellent discussion on the early reception of Cindy Sherman's work in the UK by Judith Williamson, 'Images of "Women"', *Screen* (Vol 24, no 6, Nov–Dec, 1983); reprinted in Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986).
- 10 See Fredric Jameson's initial essay, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 146, 1984. Jameson's view was re-confirmed in the title of his later book: *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

- 11 Terry Eagleton's objections to 'postmodernism' slipped into intellectual cynicism, in his book *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2003).
- 12 Useful sources here are Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) and E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London: Verso, 1988).
- 13 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
- 14 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 36.
- 15 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 37.
- 16 We can see in retrospect how much the new role of computers Lyotard insisted upon as a key cultural determinant was much neglected in these debates at that time. Lyotard's first footnote references Alain Touraine's book, *The Post-Industrial Society: Tomorrow's Social History: Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society* (New York: Random House, 1971).
- 17 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 40.
- 18 Jürgen Habermas, aligns postmodernists with 'premodernists'. See 'Modernity: An Incomplete Project', *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983). Slavoj Žižek was quick to address these Marxist disputes over the status and value of postmodernism at the time, typically reversing the assumptions and situating Habermas as the true postmodernist. See Slavoj Žižek, 'The Obscene Object of Postmodernism', *Looking Awry*.
- 19 See Douglas Eklund, ed., *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* (New York: Museum of Metropolitan Art/Yale University Press, 2009).
- 20 A key text of that period for photography would still be Abigail Solomon-Godeau's essays in her *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- 21 See for example Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005). In the essay 'The Conspiracy of Art' Baudrillard announced art no longer had a purpose to exist creating a scandal in 1996 when it was published.
- 22 Robert Hughes's TV series and book *The Shock of the New* anticipated some of these arguments, 'the end of modernity' and the rise of mass culture art. See, for example, Robert Hughes, 'The Future that Was', *The Shock of the New* (London: BBC, 1980).
- 23 Woody Allen's film *Zelig* (1983) was a 'classic' text example of the postmodernist *play* or 'subversion' of conventions, codes and audience's expectation of meanings.
- 24 See Emma Dexter and Thomas Weski, *Cruel and Tender* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).
- 25 See David Bate, 'The Art of the Document', *Art Photography* (London: Tate Publications, 2016).
- 26 The use of this term 'description' is derived here from Svetlana Alpers's brilliant work on the 'art of describing', referring to the Dutch art in seventeenth-century Europe. The characteristics of this so-called 'Northern perspective' tradition, for example, Vermeer's paintings, said to rely on the camera obscura, already resembles the 'photographic vision' of photography invented some two hundred years later. The fact that the early inventors and critics of photography often referred to Vermeer and Rembrandt for their visual standards shows the complex 'photographic' aspirations to describe a scene, at once a representation and the fugitive intimation of human action. See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- 27 See Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 28–30.
- 28 See Thierry de Duve, 'A Public Debate with Clement Greenberg' held in 1987 at the University of Ottawa, Canada, Thierry de Duve, *Clement Greenberg: Between the Lines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 152–154.
- 29 Duve, *Clement Greenberg*.
- 30 Jameson contrasts the 'realist pathos' of Evans's photograph with the 'modernist expressivity' of Vincent Van Gogh's famous paintings of workers' shoes. He also compares with Andy Warhol's later 'Diamond Shoes'. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 10–11.

- 31 It is also worth noting that Walker Evans is well known among professional photographers as 'the photographer's photographer' – the one photographer that the real professionals *really* like.
- 32 Catherine Belsey gives a good summary of this ideal 'expressive realism' in her book *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980).
- 33 The distinction between an 'obvious' and obtuse' meaning in photographs was developed by Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', *Image–Music–Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977).
- 34 Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 148.
- 35 See Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
- 36 See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003). Sontag's book turns on a moral dilemma, whether to show the suffering of war or not. For other contributions to the topic of ethics, see Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (published in French as *Le spectateur émancipé*, 2008), translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); and also see Lyotard's arguments about postmodernism, Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
- 37 See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 45.
- 38 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.
- 39 Andreas Gursky, *Untitled V*, 1997, 442.6 × 185.4cm, edition of six.
- 40 I count 198 shoes in the picture. Peter Galassi claims there are 204. See Peter Galassi, *Andreas Gursky* (New York: MOMA/Harry Abrams, 2001), 38.
- 41 On Andreas Gursky's work see Norman Bryson's short but incisive essay 'The Family Firm: Andreas Gursky and German Photography', *Art/Text*, no 67, November 1999–January 2000; also Peter Galassi, 'Gursky's World', *Andreas Gursky*.
- 42 For a summary of the anti-Nike issues see Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 365–379.
- 43 See Klein, *No Logo*, 474.
- 44 Klein, *No Logo*, 365.
- 45 Klein, *No Logo*, 113.
- 46 Of course, the picture also became famous for being sold at a Christie's auction in 2011 for a record photograph sale price at that time US\$1,524,596 (approximately £937,250).
- 47 Galassi, *Andreas Gursky*, 38.
- 48 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 37.
- 49 The term 'minimal' selves was coined in a short essay by Stuart Hall in 1987 to reflect the sense of identity forged in the migrant experience.
- 50 The most obvious case of this argument was Hal Foster, *Return of the Real* (London: MIT Press, 1996).
- 51 An intuition of this aesthetic development within art was already characterized as emergent in the 1990s in Hal Foster's collection of essays, although the 'real' is linked more to trauma, rather than 'real life'. See Foster, *Return of the Real*.
- 52 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 109.



FIGURE 2.1 The scene of Barthes’s accident, 44 rue des Écoles, Paris. Google Street View. Photograph by author.

2

ROLAND BARTHES AND *CAMERA LUCIDA*

In his essay 'The Use and Abuse of History', Friedrich Nietzsche considers the importance of thinking not only historically, but also 'unhistorically'.¹ Nietzsche is not against history, on the contrary, he distinguishes three kinds of history: monumental, antiquarian and critical. The last of these was his own preferred choice. But in a culture swamped by history, he writes:

there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of 'historical sense', that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture.²

For Nietzsche, history can become a burden so heavy to carry around on people's backs that it crushes the very will to walk or even live in the present. He claims, we 'must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember' and that we must 'instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically'.³ We might take Roland Barthes's final book on photography as a *prima facie* test case of such 'unhistorical' feeling, since *Camera Lucida* emphatically rejects history as a mode of treating the past with respect to the field of photography.⁴

I

Camera Lucida, is often seen as the terminal point for a certain mode of thinking about photography,⁵ perceived as initiating the end of structuralism and an era of semiotics to be replaced by forms of new criticism.⁶ As it turned out, *Camera Lucida* did mark the beginning of another era, although one never intended by Barthes's work in *Camera Lucida*: the turn to a new 'subjective' criticism in photography, inflected with a revised older (romantic) form of authorial 'personal response'. Barthes's book is marked by the then new interest in critical 'plurality'

(‘poststructuralism’), or what had been called, in literary criticism, the shattering of the ‘classic text’.⁷ This ‘shattering’ of the classic text had become a type of critical writing practice for Barthes long before *Camera Lucida* as a mode of dismantling the binary logic of a structuralist paradigm. Barthes had already developed his pluralist writing, for example in *S/Z*, the famous book he published in 1970 on a short story by Balzac.⁸ It was only after *Camera Lucida* is published that the implications of these textual tactics really began to emerge for photography theory, since its ‘plurality’ has in effect caused so many infinite interpretations and uses.

Camera Lucida was written in three months between 15 April and 3 June 1979.⁹ Printed in January 1980, the book was published before the road accident that knocked Barthes over on rue des Écoles, Paris, 25 February 1980. Barthes died a month later in hospital on 26 March 1980.¹⁰ The finality of his own death is widely perceived to echo the death of his mother which forms the narrative drive of his book (not its goal), but she in fact died much earlier in October 1977. As its original French title has it, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (*Camera Lucida*) continued Barthes’s turn towards *écriture*, a sort of fragmented novelistic philosophy. As in his preceding ‘writerly’ books, *S/Z* (1970), *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), *Camera Lucida* is also divided into short sections. These numbered sections (sometimes only one or two paragraphs) provide a short fragmentary sketch and furnish the text with a feeling of being incomplete. Each of these sections forms a component part of the book, which overall traces a loose thread, a vague narrative impetus across the entire text. While Barthes had originally been commissioned to write a book on cinema by *Les cahiers du cinema*, the book he actually wrote was *Camera Lucida*. As a series of written ‘scenes’ with images it is tempting to consider this book as a kind of response to cinema and the different temporalities involved in photography. The book can be seen as a set of image-sequences, as a ‘cinema of fragments’, which Barthes was known to enjoy.¹¹

Camera Lucida is an essay that belongs to this ‘poststructuralist’ context. It bears the hallmark of such concerns, a work that refuses to be ‘put in a box’. As part novel, part philosophy, part ‘biographeme’ (part author-object), the book eschews singular interpretations and offers a trap for those who try. Perhaps for this reason alone, the thesis proposed by Barthes about photography in *Camera Lucida* can appear on the one hand as a simple biographical meditation on photography, yet on the other, a complex text that is full of unresolved questions. From Barthes’s point-of-view the book is a *writerly* text, it requires the reader to produce something, it is not simply a *readerly* book whose meanings are just there to be ‘consumed’ by a reader. With so much ink already spilt, keyboards tapped and pages printed on *Camera Lucida*, it may seem excessive to return to it again. But my purpose here is different, it is not to resolve the questions or to give the book yet another new final closure, which the strategy of his book anyway refuses, but instead to open up its logic again to the question of what contribution it can make to the study of photography, as a social and historical practice.

In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes continues a project of looking for theories to reach the parts of a photograph that other theories cannot reach. Barthes now adds

and draws upon a classic, if, in his own description, ‘cynical’, use of phenomenology.¹² His book also develops an argument first glimpsed ten years earlier in ‘The Third Meaning’, an essay where he makes a distinction between the ‘obvious’ sign and an ‘obtuse’ sign, whose meanings in a photographic image are obscure (Barthes uses film stills from an Eisenstein movie).¹³ Barthes replaces these terms in *Camera Lucida* with the now famous distinction between two types of meaning in photographs: divided between ‘*studium*’ and ‘*punctum*’. The opposition between the public and the private, social and personal, flow in the book along a chain of substitutive dichotomies:

the banal and singular,
public and private,
coded and un-coded.

The *studium*, from the Latin for ‘study’ and taken to mean a ‘general interest’, in a picture is more or less cast aside after it is introduced and Barthes privileges the *punctum*, the private affect of a photograph. This decision no doubt accounts for the popularity of the book. It prioritizes a private and subjective experience of photographs over the social, cultural and historical. Barthes’s book raises the issue that many students of photography first feel as an intuitive problem when they encounter ‘studious’ approaches to photography (i.e., sociology, history, semiotics, economics, politics or psychoanalysis, etc.), that is, the place of their own subjectivity. The *punctum* beckons. Barthes addresses this explicitly in the book:

What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) ‘self’; but it is the contrary that must be said: ‘myself’ never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and ‘myself’ which is light, divided, dispersed.¹⁴

For Barthes, the self is never the image it produces, in the same way the light fluttering motions of a butterfly are never the same as the heavy caught specimen, fixed on a display.

II

Anyone who has read *Camera Lucida* will know that the book consists of two parts, each one divided equally into smaller units of twenty-four sections. Part one is numbered one to twenty-four. Part two has sections numbered twenty-five to forty-eight. Part one outlines the general scope of Barthes’s phenomenological method. Part two is dedicated to his response to, or rather his phenomenological intuition of, images, which spiral eventually into a singular image of his mother via the *punctum*. It is no secret, as Barthes himself is the first to say in the book, that his

text is involved in the expression of grief and mourning for his deceased mother, though how far it is also a discussion of what, he says, phenomenology never spoke of, that is, 'desire and mourning',¹⁵ is never explicitly elaborated as such. Yet it is not enough to say this is all there is because the book is also caught up in a thesis on photography, about its *eidos*, its fundamental essence or feature, which he says is the proper (phenomenological) aim of the book.¹⁶

Phenomenology is a major strand of twentieth-century European philosophy – Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas (Sartre is perhaps better known as an existentialist, or existentialist phenomenologist) – that is derived from the idea of 'the study of things shown', the study of 'phenomena', of things apparent to consciousness, of what can be shown.¹⁷ As Jean-François Lyotard puts it, in a book referred to by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*:

Why 'phenomenology'? The term signifies a study of 'phenomena', that is to say of *that* which appears to consciousness, *that* which is 'given'. It seeks to explore this given – 'the thing itself' which one perceives, of which one thinks and speaks – without constructing hypotheses concerning either the relationship which binds this phenomena to the being of *which* it is phenomena, or the relationship which unites it with the *I for which* it is phenomena.¹⁸

The study of the photographic image is the general 'phenomenon' and framework for Barthes's book. As already noted, *Camera Lucida* is dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre's book *l'imaginaire*, indeed, it says so at the beginning of the book: 'In homage to *l'imaginaire* by Jean-Paul Sartre'.¹⁹ Published in 1940, *l'imaginaire* was translated into English as *The Psychology of the Imagination*. In a section on the sign and the portrait, Sartre writes:

I look at a portrait of Peter. Through the photograph I concentrate on Peter in his physical individuality. The photograph is no longer the concrete object which gives me the perception; it serves as material for the image.

(p 21)

In phenomenology, consciousness belongs to 'subjective certitude' and thus (after Husserl) the essence (or *eidos*), the 'eidetic laws that guide all empirical knowledge' must be sought: the 'pure eidetic form' of the object.²⁰ In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes invokes this concept of *eidos* to continue his project of looking for theories to reach the parts of a photograph that other theories cannot reach. Barthes employs a conventional if, in his own description, 'cynical' use of phenomenology:

In this investigation of Photography, I borrowed something from phenomenology's project and something from its language. But it was a vague, casual even cynical phenomenology, so readily did it agree to distort or to evade its principles according to the whim of my analysis.²¹

He argues:

Classical phenomenology, the kind I had known in my adolescence (and there has not been any other since), had never, so far as I could remember, spoken of desire or mourning.²²

Then later, on the same page, Barthes becomes more precise and says:

As Spectator I was interested in Photography only for 'sentimental' reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.²³

The word *sentiment* in the French edition has been rendered as 'sentimental' in English, despite the typical use in French of *sentiment* to mean 'feeling' or 'opinion'.²⁴ Yet despite the different cultural translation and social inflections of sentiment and 'feeling', it is clear that Barthes is interested in something more bodily and affective than simply the semiotic code of pictures. To this extent the distinction between *studium* and *punctum*, between public and private meaning in the experience of a photograph sets out a key operating distinction in the terms of his project, mobilized by a desire for the image of his mother.

This is where the problematic of the book emerges, which is also its problem, because the two themes of photography and grief become intertwined in a way that is seen to effectively conflate an essence of photography with an essence of mourning. The essence of photography becomes its lost 'pastness'. What is taken to be a work on personal memory combines two registers: memory and mourning. The two things are not the same. As Sigmund Freud remarks in his famous essay 'Mourning and Melancholia': 'Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.'²⁵ Memory, is closer to the concept of history, a cultural discourse concerned with remembering, whereas mourning relates to the loss of a thing, and the emotional affect – reaction – attached to something that is now past. One can see that a photograph may well figure in the interplay of these discourses, as representing something in the past, or as *someone* past. That Barthes's text is concerned with a *personal* history means that grief may not be far away. After all, what more private experience is there than the death of someone you love?

It is not simply that the death of Barthes's mother has become the subject of the book, but that its work, the work of mourning, dominates its theoretical structure too. Barthes's text exhibits all the classic symptoms of mourning, the 'painful frame of mind', the 'loss of interest in the outside world' and a turning away from any activity not connected with thoughts of the lost person (characteristics described in Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' essay).²⁶ This turning away from activities not connected to his self or the lost object is evident even in the very way Barthes

introduces his concepts in the book. Take for instance this passage from the first part of the book where Barthes expresses his dissatisfaction with the existing literature on photography:

I realized with irritation that none discussed precisely the photographs which interest *me*, which give *me* pleasure or emotion. What did *I* care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite? Each time I would read something about Photography, I would think of some photograph *I loved*, and this made me furious.²⁷

Expressing impatience with an existing literature might be understandable, but more than this, the lack of interest from Barthes comes from the 'fury' of his own desire not being addressed. If, as Freud argues, the 'shadow of the object's death is cast across the subject's ego', it may seem that, in Barthes, this shadow is cast across the whole of his former social and cultural interests in photography.

Consider also the concept Barthes introduces to summarize this category, the way he treats the *studium*. The *studium* is the category that contains all the studious aspects of 'reading' a photograph, the approach which his own former self did so much to advance in the study of photography: the semiotic concepts of signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, rhetoric and ideology are all reduced to 'the *studium*' (in the earlier 'The Third Meaning' essay, they belong to the category of the 'obvious'). Once introduced in *Camera Lucida*, the *studium* is more or less rejected as lacking in interest in comparison to the *punctum*. This is very evident in his 'readings' of photographs. Take the picture titled 'May Day in Moscow, 1959' that Barthes chooses to discuss in terms of its *studium* in *Camera Lucida*.



FIGURE 2.2 William Klein, *Moscow, May Day, 1961*. © William Klein.

It is one of two photographs by the photographer William Klein discussed by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. When Barthes writes of it, he says 'it informs us':

it immediately yields up those 'details' which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge. When William Klein photographs 'Mayday, 1959' in Moscow, he teaches me how Russians dress (which after all I don't know): I note a boy's big cloth cap, another's necktie, an old woman's scarf around her head, a youth's haircut, etc.²⁸

Already in his account of the *studium* of this picture, he is propelled towards the details. Yet there is no discussion of the different 'paradigmatic' messages to be skimmed off from the picture, as he had once famously done to a French advertisement for Panzani pasta in 'Rhetoric of the Image' in 1964.²⁹ There is no distinction made between the denoted signs and connoted messages that construct the complex *rhetorical* message of a picture. Nor does he engage with the photographer's intentions (or critique them), when he claims now this is 'inevitably' part of the encounter with a *studium*.³⁰ Remember, this is a photograph that Barthes has *chosen* to discuss, as he has all the photographs in the book, initially sparked by some impulse related to his desire. It would appear that Klein's photograph offers, like all the others featured in the book, a provisional 'interest' because of its *studium*. Yet this interest he expresses towards the studious theme of this photograph quickly expires, it is meagre, weak almost to the point of indifference. It is as though the photograph had caught his attention only fleetingly, in the way a viewer in a gallery might glance at a picture because they saw something for a second of interest in it, or the child who sees a toy, only to discard it when realizing that the thing they thought they saw in it, its 'interest', was actually lacking. This is of course Barthes's point: we do not pay attention to *all* photographs, some pictures enchant us less than others do, even if, at first, we see some initial interest in them. Such are the vicissitudes of spectatorship.

What Barthes tells us in these gestures towards 'reading' the *studium* (something he cannot bear) is that, for him, there is nothing to recognize in the picture beyond its code, its 'myth'. We can see here the dis-interest, the poverty of meaning seen in the outside world so characteristic of the mourner. There is nothing that he can make use of in a studious approach, for it does not touch his cherished wish: to see his mother alive.

In contrast, when the photographer William Klein (who makes no claim to be a semiotician) responds to Roland Barthes's readings of his pictures in *Camera Lucida*, his is already a more developed, sophisticated and studious (semiotic) commentary.³¹ Firstly, like Barthes he recognizes, an ethnological dimension: he sees five different ethnic types within three square metres. However for Klein this diverse ethnic group (the pictorial *denotation*) also suggests the 'family of an empire' (the cultural *connotation*) of the Soviet Union. The central figure is a 'grandmother of Gorky' figure – a term used by Klein as shorthand (metaphor) for 'Mother Russia'. Klein draws our attention to the symbolic meaning of the image (the connotation) of the central mother figure, who, since she dominates its centre, with other

figures also looking at her, she is associated (connotated) to the strong determined motherly figure in Maxim Gorky's famous novel, *Mother*. Klein's chain of signifiers are linked as a formal more open level too.

In a second register, Klein suggests the picture demonstrates the different possible relations between a subject and photographer, all within the same frame. Klein elaborates, the 'grandmother' knows she is being photographed and strikes a pose, 'her pose'. She is at the centre of the picture, but because of the wide-angle lens view, six other people are also included in the frame (without Klein knowing at the time, he says). Each of these, Klein suggests, reveals a different type of behaviour (*comportement*) adopted in front of the camera: irony, anxiety, suspicion or, by accident, a violated dignity. Graphically, Klein notes, the play of looks sent and returned and the way the heads and bodies converge, all contribute to make a 'touching variation' of the 'group portrait'.³² What Barthes only sees, Klein claims (accuses), is 'the document', as a set of social facts. Barthes in his discussion of the picture sticks to the basic *denotation* of the photograph: 'here are the Russians in 1961, look how they dress, wear their hats and cut their hair at that time'.³³ (Note: the caption in *Camera Lucida* has incorrectly dated the photograph as 1959, whereas Klein dates it as 1961.³⁴) While Klein accords Barthes the pleasure to see what he wants to see in the photograph, to read it 'personally' (Klein says the reading of photographs is a personal affair), he is nevertheless surprised at Barthes's lack of interest in the intention of the photograph, which Barthes treats as almost an accident.³⁵

What are we to make of these different interpretations? Does Barthes show himself to be a poor critic, a semiotician found wanting in social interest in the functions of photographs? While Klein is enthusiastic about the codes of the picture (not surprising perhaps since it is one of his own), Barthes finds the image lacking. Klein, despite the slight of his intentionality by Barthes's reading of the photograph, reveals how Barthes has essentially withdrawn here from even a basic studious interest in photography. Obviously, this is not to pit author against critic in a superficial comparison of semiotic skills. It is rather to pose the question, if the image is finally so lacking, why did Barthes choose it in the first place? What was the initial spark that made him want to address it at all? Perhaps, given we know the *dénouement* of the book (the figure of Barthes's mother), is it not the very centrality of this mother figure that hails the initial interest of Barthes towards it? She appears, in his book, as a word-less connotation of the picture, only to be dismissed as part of the *studium* of this image. Yet of course, the *studium* is never completely without value in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes *does* recognize, theoretically and intellectually, that the *studium* of photographs has its social functions, which he calls their 'myth':

to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire. And I, the *Spectator*, I recognise them with more or less pleasure: I invest them with my *studium* (which is never my delight or my pain).³⁶

It is this 'delight' or 'pain' that Barthes seeks from the picture, an obtuse meaning, a *punctum*, and this is his passion in *Camera Lucida*.

However, the process of identifying the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* proves to be difficult, fundamentally slippery. It involves Barthes in a process of *semiosis*, a chain of slippages and associations where any final meaning never quite rests. In part one, Barthes drifts from one photograph to another, a displacement of his interest from one image-signifier to another. In the process, the concept of the *punctum* is sketched out, pointed to as a series of intimations, which are manifested as a series of displacements from one thing to another. First it is:

‘that accident which pricks me (and bruises me, is poignant to me)’ (27),
 a ‘detail’ (43),
 the ‘voice of singularity’ (43),
 the ‘not-coded’ (45),
 or ‘certain latency’ (53),
 ‘an addition’ (55),
 the ‘unlocatable’ (57),
 ‘a kind of subtle beyond’ (59).³⁷

After scrutiny of various ‘public photographs’ in part one of the book, Barthes acknowledges he has to ‘descend deeper’ into himself.³⁸

III *Punctum*

At the beginning of part two, Barthes turns to his own family photographs.³⁹ In a journey through successive private photographs his eventual dilemma about photography is that their *studium* is inadequate to his own memory of his mother. He rummages through the different personal photographs of her until he finds the ‘right’ one, that is, the one where, in his own words, he will really ‘recognize’ her.⁴⁰ Ultimately, it is one specific detail of one particular photograph that is at the centre of his text: the so-called ‘Winter Garden’ photograph of his mother.⁴¹ All the others are worthless. The affective relation that Barthes credits to this particular photograph of his mother is found, not in its general studiousness, not even in her ‘air’, but first of all in her face and hands, then her expression and eyes. In her gaze back at the camera in this photograph, there is something in this ‘look’ and the ‘brightness of her eyes’ that animates, ‘touches’ him.⁴² It is ‘the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever’.⁴³ Here, in this fundamental exchange of looks between Roland Barthes and the photograph of his mother, the *punctum* is finally identified and elaborated. There is, he says, ‘another *punctum*’ that emerges, beyond the ‘detail’, not another form, but a new *punctum*: ‘time’.⁴⁴

But we should not be too hasty in rushing towards this narrative finale of Barthes’s little book. (‘Time’ will re-emerge in its own way in the narrative.) What of the dialogue between the *studium* and the *punctum*, which, after all must co-habit the same scene? What is their relationship? For Barthes, although ‘uncoded’, the *punctum* is nevertheless operative within the representational domain of the *studium*. As Jacques Derrida put it, the *punctum* ‘can invade the field of the *studium*, to

which, strictly speaking it does not belong'.⁴⁵ Located 'outside all fields and codes', the *punctum*, Derrida argues (after Barthes), also 'induces' metonymy, 'and this is its force'.⁴⁶ This means the *studium* and *punctum* are somehow intertwined. What *Camera Lucida* argues is that something personal, something 'affective' can operate inside the *studium* even though it is not part of it. The *studium/punctum* dualism cannot be separated, they are relational and linked to each other. Whilst it is the powerful latent force of the *punctum* that animates the desire of Barthes in looking at a photograph, the *punctum* is, nevertheless parasitic on the manifest *studium*. Thus, the *punctum* figures as a supplement (desire) to the social interest of the *studium*, while the *studium* is the supplement/interest to the affective force of the *punctum*.

As already noted, Barthes's own attempt to identify the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* shifts about from one thing to another. Indeed, it is the identity of the *punctum* to drift, to move and slip across from one image to another and from one thing to another in a series of associative connections and dislocations. This is a process already identified long ago by Victor Burgin (in his review of *Camera Lucida*) in terms of the Freudian concept of the 'dream-work' process. In the dream, signifiers merge (condense) and displace significance from one person, object or thing to another. Like the dream, a photograph can be the scene of a viewer's wish, and as such is subject to the same rhetorical mechanisms of the dream-work processes (condensation, displacement, secondary revision and considerations of representation). Burgin identifies these dream-work mechanisms in Barthes's own process of search for the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*. So, for example, a particular *punctum* identified by Barthes as the 'strapped pumps' (shoes) of one figure in a photograph (James Van der Zee's 1926 studio portrait of an African American Harlem family) is revisited ten pages later when Barthes realizes that it was not the shoe strap in the photograph that affected him, but the necklace worn around her neck. The necklace in the photograph 'reminds' him of *another* necklace once worn by his deceased maiden aunt.⁴⁷ As Burgin argues, we can see here the dream-like rhetorical slippages and substitution at work in the *punctum*:

the metaphorical displacement from the circle round the ankle to the throat; the metonymical displacement from the woman in the photograph to the maiden aunt, 'whose necklace was shut up in a box'; we quickly arrive at the sources of the emotion in the themes of death and sexuality, played out within a family scenario.⁴⁸

The 'circle' is displaced twice: first between different parts of the body inside a photograph (the shoe strap to necklace), then from the (James Van der Zee) photograph to a historical necklace, belonging to Barthes's own deceased aunt. From public image to private meaning, from history to subjective memory, the substitutive 'detail' in an image is motivated by the 'intentionality' that Barthes himself describes as love and death. We can see how the tiny detail of one photograph lends a signifier to something else along a chain of associations, about something intimate in the spectator that is not even necessarily conscious at the time of its interest or

affect. In other words, we can see here the dialectic between *studium* and *punctum* that animates the spectator (or even a photographer, I would add) to any specific image that gathers attention. We cannot completely distinguish or separate the initial 'social' interest in the *studium* (the aspect of the photograph) from the thread of the *punctum*.

If we return for a moment to Roland Barthes's response to William Klein's photograph, may we now trace back a punctilious interest in his studious dismissal of it? Is there not a thread that runs to this central mother figure in Klein's photograph, back to the face and eyes of his own mother – even if it is glimpsed only for a second and then dismissed? Does the elderly woman not offer a displaced chain of association to his own mother, perhaps hinted in the commanding presence of this woman at the centre of the picture (and over the people around her)? Her knowing squint at the camera, which lends itself to a look, which Barthes finds in his mother? The gaze of a mother looked at by her son? If we turn back from such speculation, as we surely must, it is nevertheless the process of semiotic displacement within, across and between images that complicates the *eidos* of photography, which Barthes seeks to discover.

It should be noted that while Barthes sets up a dichotomy between the 'coded' meaning of the *studium* as a social message and the *punctum* as 'uncoded' affect of private memory, the distinction should not be confused with the actual type of photograph under discussion, whether public or private. The distinction is confusing, perhaps confused in *Camera Lucida* in the way that Barthes switches emphasis from looking at *public* photographs in part one of the book to (mostly his own) *private* photographs in part two of the book. Public pictures (e.g., art, news, journalism, etc.) and private (e.g., family or personal) photographs may be assigned conventional social roles which are not to be confused with the problematic that the book implicitly addresses. To be clear, the argument of the book does not claim that only *personal* photographs trigger the *punctum*, it is rather that in his re-search Barthes specifically uses and is drawn towards his own private photographs to enable him to explore the nature of the *punctum*. In part two of the book, the affect of the *punctum* is traced through the contours of his private family photograph(s), the look back at the camera of his mother and so on. From here he moves back outwards, towards the *punctum* within public photographs. Towards the end of the book, in section 40, he deals explicitly with this issue of the public/private relation in his argument to make a distinction that counters assumptions often made about the *punctum*. It is worth quoting, Barthes writes:

The reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading. This is obvious for old ('historical') photographs, in which I read a period contemporary with my youth, or with my mother, or beyond, with my grandparents, and into which I project a troubling being, that of the lineage of which I am the final term. But this is also true of the photographs which at first glance have no link, even a metonymic one, with my existence (for instance all journalistic photographs).⁴⁹

A key point here is that whatever type of photograph, public or private Barthes argues, the reading of them 'is always at bottom, a private reading'. This point raises several important critical consequences and issues for history and questions about memory (public or private) in photography: questions about the way that photographs affect us generally, socially and privately, and how we consider or treat them as artefacts of history, and as visual forms of 'memory'. We can begin to see here that Barthes's book is not merely 'personal', or 'subjective', meaning something individual, but rather, it uses his own biography to exemplify the *structure* of the subjective in photography. It is not, in other words, that the death of Barthes's mother is the subject of the book, but that Barthes's 'intentionality' enables the theoretical structure of the book to elucidate the relationship of photography to subjectivity. Barthes raises the problematic: what does photography do to the subjectivity of the spectator?⁵⁰

In effect, Barthes's essay opens up the pensive space of the spectator, the space in which we 'occupy' the image.⁵¹ What we learn from *Camera Lucida*, to borrow a term from D.W. Winnicott, is the 'potential space' of the spectator.⁵² The will to knowledge is Barthes's wish to find the latent meaning of the *punctum*, bound up in the manifest evidence of the *studium*. It is at this point that we must also separate the structure of mourning or grief from the *eidōs* of photography that Barthes seeks to identify. Grief is what drives his will to look – the 'lost object' – which is not the aim of his phenomenological process, but only the material process that advances it. In this sense, 'death' and the mourning process of grief has overshadowed the object that gave rise to it – photography. Barthes's book offers a set of propositions, often overlooked and clouded, as it so often is in *Camera Lucida*, by his family story (mother–son), but it may be said, there are other propositions more profound.

The comments by Barthes on death and photography are most often related to the question of his mother, photographs as harbingers of death and so on. If we can leave behind, for a moment Barthes's agony and his expressed grief for his mother's death, we are left with the *eidōs* of photography. This essence (*eidōs*) is not death but, as noted earlier, Barthes's final claim for the *punctum*: time. The photograph's capacity to evoke time, experienced as the pain or pleasure of duration, is animated by the encounter of image and spectator.

IV Time

The intimation of time and its collapse in the photograph is present everywhere in *Camera Lucida*. In section 33 on 'The Pose', Barthes notes the fictional cinema actor 'combines two poses: the actor's 'this has been' and that of the character role they play.⁵³ Two different times are collapsed into the same image, the time of the actor and the time of their character. (I imagine a 'cowboy' western movie where the period of the film is betrayed by the actor's hairstyle, make-up and costume.) Barthes names this the 'melancholy of Photography' (seeing actors in a film he knows to be dead).⁵⁴ Barthes invokes the historical disturbance of time in the photograph to make the point that photography has changed our conception of history itself:

Each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly (the incessant aggressions of the Press against the privacy of stars and the growing difficulties of legislation to govern them testify to this movement).⁵⁵

Photography has turned the privacy of the public sphere inside out. Through the generalization of this private in the public, 'the Photograph' is 'tamed', turned banal 'until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandal, its madness'.⁵⁶ Resisting this, Barthes wants 'to utter interiority without yielding intimacy'.⁵⁷ So, if a private reading inhabits all consumption of photographs whether public or private, then that 'private reading' is not reducible to the *punctum* alone since it involves the *studium* too. The *punctum* inside the *studium*, as what might be called the unconscious desire of the spectator, returns us in a way to the very problem of the historical use-value of photographs, because in fact it is the detail that sparks attention to the *studium* and subsequent drive to analysis, or at least as the element for rumination and association.

If as Barthes also claims 'every photograph is a certificate of presence' it is nevertheless a structure that is lacking. The disappointment about photography for Barthes is its failure to provide that special 'personal' quality that one's own mother has, as distinct from the general social category of pictures of 'mothers' as social code. This is why he claims that a photograph 'blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory'.⁵⁸

In the end, quite literally, *Camera Lucida* is not about sentiment or nostalgia, a yearning for the past (the photograph is not 'Proustian' he says⁵⁹), but the 'astonishment' that here in the picture is the 'something' that *was*:

The photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on the other 'but it has indeed been'): a mad image, chafed by reality.⁶⁰

Barthes likens the photograph to a hallucination. Like the dream, the photograph is also 'chafed by reality', whereas cinema, by contrast, is the opposite of hallucination, he says, 'simply an illusion'.⁶¹ Where his mother is actually 'gone' forever, in the fantasy she remains 'here' in the photograph and its field of literary signification. A photograph disrupts the historical convention of time, which is why the photograph as 'a temporal hallucination' is analogous to the model of the camera lucida, an instrument used in daylight (rather than the dark box required by a camera obscura).⁶² Here Barthes comes closest to saying the photograph is like a daydream. In this potential space, the time of the picture loses its semantic (literary) quality and the chronological distinction between past, present and future.⁶³

Like the dream-image (or the unconscious, which has no conception of time), a figure can be both dead *and* alive, which is what Barthes means by photography as a 'temporal hallucination'.

How is this to be situated with what Barthes finds in the *noeme* of photography, its phenomenological cognitive object of thought, the 'that-has-been'?⁶⁴ And where is this 'that-has-been' to be situated in the two concepts, the *studium* and *punctum* of the photograph? Much confusion has reigned over the 'that-has-been', partly because it is used in numerous ways already in Barthes's book, but also because commentators have congealed it into a cliché, where photographs are an embodied essence of 'history' or 'pastness' as such.

Barthes's text shows, implicitly, the complexity of time in photography. The duration of time in photographs is not the same as chronological or historical time – past-present-future – which is seen as irreversible. In a 'temporal hallucination', the experience of photographs invoked by Barthes, time *is* reversible, un-linear, or can be compressed (condensed) together and displaced *differently*. Against the irreversible 'arrow of time' in historical time, where the photograph belongs resolutely to the single point of its making, Barthes shatters this temporal model in his book on photography and opens it to the subjective processes of the dream and fantasy, and its actual effect on the spectator's body and its imagination.

We must distinguish here between, on one hand, the time and temporality of the *studium* and that of the *punctum*. The *studium* (conventional semiotic wisdom on photographs) offers a temporal paradox, as pointed out by Barthes: 'it is here now', but 'it has already happened'. The photograph's *studium* already disrupts a traditional conception of historical temporality (past-present-future) to show a past 'as it was' (already a myth) but seen now in another time, when 'that time' has gone. A temporal hallucination may take the path of different durations, times, where the event of the photograph is simultaneously past, present and future.⁶⁵ In any one moment, a temporal hallucination can be *retrospective*, as if 'I was there then' or *prospective*, as if the event (in the picture) is now. So when, in section 39 of the book, Barthes poignantly points out the future death of a man in an 1865 photograph, the portrait of Lewis Payne (the would-be political assassin) who is shown in handcuffs alive in the picture, Barthes hallucinates being there *in the past* in order to imagine Payne's 'anterior future': as 'now' dead (already when Barthes wrote the book). Barthes complicates this even more in his caption to the photograph in the book: 'He is dead and he is going to die'.⁶⁶ If the *punctum* is 'he is going to die', as Barthes claims in the book, then the *punctum* is prospective: a temporal effect of 'deferred action' or 'afterwardness' of the photographic signifier.⁶⁷

The *punctum* is the effect of the past in the present, an affective state caused by the consciousness of time collapsing, disturbed or even ruined. In the subjective space of the spectator's present is the future anterior death. Of course, the affect of the *punctum* may not only be linked to a past 'alive' person becoming dead (Barthes's preoccupation) in the future-present, but to other dimensions of temporal disruption (hallucination) that have meaning for the present too.

We can see this in the Winter Garden photograph chosen by Barthes of his mother (which as Jacques Derrida says, he neither shows nor does not show). At one point, Barthes writes: 'In front of the Winter Garden photograph I am a bad dreamer who vainly holds out his arms toward the possession of the image.'⁶⁸ Here Barthes becomes a 'possessive' spectator, eager to keep hold of the pastness of the image in his presence.⁶⁹ In fact, curiously this historical photograph that Barthes chooses of his mother (or rather, its *punctum* chooses him) is of her *before* she was his mother. In the Winter Garden photograph Barthes describes her as a young child (Barthes calls her 'my little girl'⁷⁰). The photograph, taken (by an anonymous photographer) long before Barthes was even born, means the *studium* of the photograph is not linked as a memory-image in any usual sense, that is, of Barthes's 'mother', as an image that was familiar from his own memory, for instance, as he might have remembered her from his own youth. Instead, the *punctum* comes from what he finds in this image from the past. What engrosses, punctures (is the *punctum* for) Barthes is that part of the image that betrays something he recognizes as her, a look, a gest that pierces through history, the *studium* of the picture, as her youth and so on, into the presence of his present. The *punctum* relates to a part of the past that is activated, re-activated (a deferred action) by the present. We can thus speak here of the *afterwardness* of the *punctum*, as that something that animates a signifier in its future.

So here is the historical lesson (I argue) about time in photography from *Camera Lucida*: the photograph as *studium* leads to the past (the temporal moment coded by the photographic image), whereas the *punctum* comes from the past into the future-present (the spectator's desire). In this formulation, time moves in different directions: the *studium* is historically retrospective, from the present to the past; the *punctum* prospective towards the present. The temporality of the photograph is opposed in the differing concepts. Now we can perhaps understand Barthes's hostility to the *studium* as 'History'.

V History

In section 26 of *Camera Lucida* titled 'History as Separation', Barthes explicitly condemns 'history' for interfering with his relation to the photographs of his mother that he had been looking at: 'With regard to many of these photographs, it was History which separated me from them.'⁷¹ Barthes continues:

History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history. ... That is what the time when my mother was alive *before me* is – History (moreover, it is the period which interests me most, historically).⁷²

Barthes longs for the past, not History, but for the intimacy that was alive in the maternal image of his personal life.

I understand 'History' here as that discipline which constructs linear social time, and which Barthes locates within the same place as the category of the *studium*: an obstacle to examining the *punctum* as prompt of personal memory. In this seeming 'counter-argument' against history, Barthes outlines the use of personal memory to make the legibility of photographs speak of experience. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes proposes to return us from what Giorgio Agamben has characterized as 'the expropriation of experience'.⁷³ The ambition is to move towards a more dialectical historical image (one closer to that of Karl Marx or Walter Benjamin). It is the project of Barthes to work against the expropriation of experience in the overwhelming presence of photographs and the abundant failure to engage anything new about experience – beyond the stereotyped social 'code'. It is in this respect that he also attacks 'History' and 'Photography':

A paradox: the same century invented History and Photography. But History is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse which abolishes mythic Time; and the Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony; so that everything, today, prepares our race for this impotence: to be no longer able to conceive duration, affectively or symbolically.⁷⁴

In this much overlooked passage of the book, 'History and Photography' (capitalized terms used as proper nouns of their discourses), Barthes claims, 'tame' our capacity to conceive *duration* and abolish *Time*.⁷⁵ Finally we reach the crux of his argument. The invention of photography abolishes the affective aspect of duration, or at least creates a relation to duration that is quite different from before it. We can here turn back to the phenomenology that Barthes explicitly draws upon, Lyotard's book *Phenomenology*:

We must not say time flows *in* consciousness – it is, on the contrary, consciousness which, on the basis of its now, deploys or constitutes time ...

... time, and consequently history, is not grasped in itself, but must be turned back to the consciousness for which there is no history.⁷⁶

This is the point, photographs are objects that 'give a consciousness of time', even if they also tame it.⁷⁷ The consciousness of time that photographs evoke is part of the question raised by Barthes about photography and, as a critical consequence, their cultural effects (not only personal affects) on issues of memory, history and time.

In relation to history, at one point, Barthes claims: 'Photography has the same relation to History that the biographeme has to biography.'⁷⁸ The 'biographeme' is a detail or fragment from a larger whole biographical story. It offers a detail, a part of something, a few particulars of a biography. A shard of knowledge that cuts, almost painful when you really feel it. In his analogy of the biographeme with the photograph it is also a fragment, what we might call a *photographeme*, a metonym, the rhetorical form that signifies a whole through a part, as part object, an *objet a*. The 'whole', in Barthes's poststructuralist version, would never be the great unified

'History', a nineteenth-century model of general history, the 'universal' chronological time of 'great events', or the narrative of a nation or *ethnos*, those mythical stories that Barthes despised. It would instead be closer to a history, as Barthes puts it, 'my own history'.⁷⁹ Yet we have begun to grasp that Barthes's book is not 'personal' (the subjective as not something only 'individual'), but rather social, cultural and psychological: the impact of photography on the very *structure* of subjectivity, on the history of a subject. As such, the role of personal affect, feelings and emotions belongs to the public power of photographs too, not 'merely personal', but as a widely disseminated aspect of the social value of photography.

The disjunctive space of the photograph, its temporal telescoping of 'time' is what plays on his mind (dissolving back and forth) like a hallucination. In the Winter Garden photograph Barthes sees something that is beyond the 'date-stamp' of the studious historical scene. The time of the picture is reversed in duration, from where he 'recognizes' her (gaze) as seen from his own subjective experience. It is thus a character trait spotted as a signifier *inside* the historical time of the photographic *studium*, but operates *outside* of its duration. The ahistorical time of the *punctum* is an image in subjective time, in the time of the subject, and their memory. For the historical researcher, the location of meaning is thus not simply 'in' a photograph, but in the interface – the interaction – between the cultural memory carried and mobilized by the viewer towards the image. If the photograph as *studium* leads towards its History, the *punctum* brings its reading towards the future-present. The two scenes overlap. The 'other' signifier (the *punctum*) brings another message from the past into the present, or what can be called the *afterwardness* of the historical image.

The *punctum*, in other words, is a message that relates to what the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche has named the *enigmatic signifier*, something transmitted, but not understood at the time and revised later in the light of a different situation.⁸⁰ We might describe this as a space/time paradox of the photograph, of all photographs, perhaps of all images too. The *punctum* is a signifier without a signified, but nevertheless is a process of signification that leads towards an *affect*. We should be clear that this conception of the *punctum* as *affect* is distinct from a 'named emotion' or a *codified* feeling, which is part of the social structure of meaning, the conventional signifier-image of, for example, the stock social codes that constitute a traditional semiotics of human moods and emotions: anger, sadness, love, disgust, fear, happiness, pleasure and so on.⁸¹

We need to remember that it is precisely the *duality* of *studium/punctum* that affords this more reflexive critical interpretation of pictures. In this way we can recognise the *affect* that characterizes Barthes's theory of the *punctum* as what can be brought into historical play, not simply as a foil or as an antidote to disturb the general sense of 'already coded' meanings of the whole picture (including stock-in-trade codes of emotion, anger, happiness, sadness, etc.), but to recognize how they re-motivate and re-animate the value and meaning of a picture for anyone. It is the *to and fro* between different directions, present, past and future, and their collapse that has defined the description and *critique* of time in contemporary postmodernity.

The *photographeme* stands as a monument to these temporal disjunctions. In linear chronological time and monumental cultural time, photographs are fragments, which combine the fleeting 'date-stamp' of historical data, whatever the image, confronted by the subjective imprint of the spectator (and their dreams and hallucinations in) viewing it. Whether these relationships are reified one into the other, historical time subjugated to individual subjective time (as with Barthes in mourning and grief), or the abjection of personal time in history (Barthes's complaint about History), what should remain from this, as far as I am concerned, critically and *theoretically*, is the dialectical relation between them. The privilege accorded to the *punctum* by readers of Barthes in *Camera Lucida* needs to be returned, re-inserted back into the total signifying economy of the *studium* image-sign. Against a collective history of 'public facts', here can be imagined the outline for a practice of collective memory: a *dialogue* between the discursive (historical) space and time of the *studium* and the subjective affect of (personal) time in the *punctum*. This disjunctive time/space relation in memory is anyway a condition in spectatorship of viewing all photographs, but its recognition in theory is crucial for the project of any critical history of photography in the afterwardness of postmodern culture.

If, as Barthes claims, cameras are 'clocks for seeing', the space they show is nevertheless subject to the temporal hallucinations of human experience. This is the dialectical lesson of Barthes's *Camera Lucida*: the subjective time of the spectator invades the historical space of the image. Such a proposition might have already been intimated in eighteenth-century theory, with the concept of what was then called the *punctum temporis* of the picture.

Notes

- 1 See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Use and Abuse of History', *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, Vol 5, translated by Adrian Collins (London: T.N. Foulis, 1909).
- 2 Nietzsche, 'The Use and Abuse of History', 9.
- 3 Nietzsche, 'The Use and Abuse of History', 10.
- 4 The fact that Barthes was never a historian nor claimed to be has not stopped historians of photography making critiques of Barthes's book as though it is a history of photography book. See *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (London: MIT Press, 2009).
- 5 The idea that *Camera Lucida* is a zero point, or 'starting again', is given in the title of the collection of essays about the book: *Photography Degree Zero*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen. The title of course echoes the title Roland Barthes gave to his own first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, in 1953. There are many other significant essays on *Camera Lucida*, see for example, the earlier collection of essays, *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).
- 6 Barthes's earlier structural analysis of popular cultural artefacts is well documented, specifically the de-'mythology' of images in popular culture, the semiotic treatment of advertising photographs as a 'rhetorical' analysis, the critique of news photographs, and so on.
- 7 A good summary of structuralism and poststructuralism and their distinction is given in Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 8 Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Noonday Press, 1974) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970).

- 9 According to Louis-Jean Calvet, Barthes wrote the book between 15 April and 3 June 1979, see Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, translated by Sarah Wykes (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 235.
- 10 Calvet, *Roland Barthes*, 247.
- 11 See Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', *Image–Music–Text* (London: Fontana, 1979), 65–66. Also for an introduction to the cinema habits of Roland Barthes see Victor Burgin, 'Barthes's Discretion' in *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (London: University of California Press, 1996).
- 12 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 20.
- 13 Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning' in *Image–Music–Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, or in *The Responsibility of Forms*, translated by Richard Howard. In fact the original French version of the collection of essays in English titled as *The Responsibility of Forms* was called *L'obvie et l'obtus* (*The Obvious and the Obtuse*). See also Victor Burgin's insightful essay 'Re-reading *Camera Lucida*' in Batchen, *Photography Degree Zero*.
- 14 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.
- 15 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.
- 16 *Camera Lucida* is also divided into two parts like Lyotard's book. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, translated by Brian Beakley (New York: University of New York Press, 1991). Lyotard discusses 'The Eidetic', 37–41.
- 17 David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2001), 298.
- 18 The notes and bibliography listed in the French edition *La Chambre claire* were omitted in the English edition. Jean-François Lyotard's book on phenomenology is cited in Barthes's bibliography. See Jean-François Lyotard, *La phénoménologie* (*Que sais-je?*) (Paris: PUF, 1976); and *Phenomenology*, trans. Beakley, 32–33.
- 19 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1940), translated as *The Psychology of the Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1978). Coincidentally, Sartre also died a few weeks after Barthes, 15 April 1980.
- 20 See Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, trans. Beakley, 41.
- 21 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 20.
- 22 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.
- 23 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.
- 24 Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980), 42.
- 25 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', 1917 [1915], *On Metapsychology*, Pelican Freud Library, Vol 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 251–252.
- 26 Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', 252.
- 27 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 7 (*La chambre claire*, 19). My italics.
- 28 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 28.
- 29 Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', *Image–Music–Text*.
- 30 'To recognise the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers.' Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27–28.
- 31 See William Klein, 'Sur deux photos de William Klein', *Roland Barthes et la photo: Le pire des signes*, edited by Gilles Mora (Paris: Contrejour, 1990).
- 32 Klein, 'Sur deux photos', 30.
- 33 Klein, 'Sur deux photos', 30.
- 34 See William Klein, *Moscow* (Tokyo: Zokeisha Publishers, 1964).
- 35 Klein, 'Sur deux photos', 30.
- 36 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 28.
- 37 All citations from Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.
- 38 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 60.
- 39 Already in 1975 – four years earlier – in Barthes's novelistic 'autobiography', *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he says he is fascinated by old family photographs, this time

- of himself: 'And, as it happens, only the images of my youth fascinate me.' See Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 2.
- 40 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 65.
- 41 A 'Winter Garden' was what we would call a glass conservatory.
- 42 Barthes 'reanimates' what we can presume is a monochrome photograph into a colour image, he speaks of 'the photographic trace of a colour, the 'blue-green of her pupils'. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 66.
- 43 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 69.
- 44 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.
- 45 Jacques Derrida, 'Roland Barthes', *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 57.
- 46 Derrida, 'Roland Barthes', *The Work of Mourning*, 57.
- 47 See Victor Burgin, 'Re-reading *Camera Lucida*', *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 85–86. Also Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 116.
- 48 See Burgin, 'Re-reading *Camera Lucida*', 85.
- 49 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 97–98.
- 50 Since *Camera Lucida* is about the spectator his argument does not directly concern 'the photographer', although we may apply the same lessons to their 'intentionality' too.
- 51 See Jacques Rancière, 'The Pensive Image', *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).
- 52 The potential space envisaged here is that between the photograph and the spectator. In D.W. Winnicott's work the potential space is between a baby and its mother, which is also fitting, in a way, for Barthes's example too. See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1996), 107.
- 53 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 79.
- 54 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 79.
- 55 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 98.
- 56 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 118.
- 57 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 98.
- 58 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 91.
- 59 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 82.
- 60 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 115.
- 61 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 118.
- 62 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 106.
- 63 Paul Ricoeur notes the 'linguistic support' that we are all given in our name, 'received from another', which I suggest is abolished here. See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 129.
- 64 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77, 96.
- 65 Gilles Deleuze describes the past-present-future of time in the photographic image as 'all implicated in the event, rolled up in the event, and thus simultaneous and inexplicable'. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2* (London: Continuum, 2011), 97.
- 66 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 95.
- 67 Deferred action is a Freudian term (*Nachträglichkeit*) to denote an experience, impression or memory that is psychologically revised later, in the light of subsequent actions or events. See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 1988), 111–114. Jean Laplanche develops this concept as 'afterwardness' in his later work. See Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999) and Jean Laplanche, *Seduction, Translation and the Drives* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992).
- 68 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 100.
- 69 See Laura Mulvey, 'The Possessive Spectator', *Death 24× a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 171.
- 70 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 72.
- 71 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 65.

- 72 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 65.
- 73 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993), 19.
- 74 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 93.
- 75 Of course, the collapse of 'historical time' into simultaneity is a key feature of the postmodern.
- 76 Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, 113.
- 77 Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, 114.
- 78 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 30.
- 79 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 65.
- 80 Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, 254–255.
- 81 I draw on the distinction made by Jameson. See Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 29.



FIGURE 3.1 Hannah Starkey, 'Butterfly Catchers', 1999. Framed c-type print. 122 × 152 cm © Hannah Starkey, courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

3

RETURN OF THE *TABLEAU*

For over two hundred years the question that preoccupied the visual arts was how to evoke a complex story with a single image. The concept of the tableau is part of the answer to that question. The discussion involves transdisciplinary thought and historical work, but first, the discipline of ‘photography’.

According to popular opinion in the last century, photography is a technology with two ‘dual-purpose’ functions. In one of these, photography is conceived as *objective* and real, ideas that are typically elaborated in notions of documentary and photojournalism. On the other, photography is said to be *subjective* and expressive, an idea typically expanded in various vague notions of personal creativity, and expounded notably in the discourses of art, advertising and fashion photography. Both objective and subjective views are often seen as reflections of the personal ideals of the photographer as a special person, with a special capacity to ‘see’, often happily also articulated as their ‘genius’. Whilst it is true that successful photographers have often developed specific skills and a highly tuned awareness to what a camera can do, the framing of those ideas through the objective and subjective dichotomy (a legacy of nineteenth-century disputes about photography and art) have also severely constricted thinking about photography. One need only glance at a number of discussions of its fields, like documentary or social media now, which often seem burdened with the same contradictory binary logic that dominated twentieth-century photography criticism. Yet instead of the contradictory binary logic being acknowledged, recognized as different discourses or even construed as ‘areas of friction’ between these categories, practices are reduced to one category or the other, despite obviously transgressing them in different ways.¹ The issue is left unresolved. So, for example, amateur photography, ‘family’ and domestic photography, pornography, travel photography or even reportage photography could all in very different ways overlap the objective/subjective distinction. Ontology and epistemology are left to themselves as outdated theoretical issues and

historical problems. It was not until the emergent discourses of postmodernism and poststructuralism that these binary categorical problems in photography were ever really dismantled. In photographic theory and the new practices these categories were explicitly challenged, questioned and dismantled.² As a result the old objective/subjective oppositions became untenable, even if they never went away.

Documentary photographers began to talk openly for the first time about the 'subjective' position of their work; advertising could address the factual; and so on. I characterize that postmodern moment as a return of the *tableau image*, whose appearance was emblematic of the rejection of these binaries. Instead, the photographic image was conceived as a kind of performance which includes the camera, objects, actors, props, space, scenery and lighting. The old objective/subjective distinction began to fade, a process whose legacy is witnessed today, their virtual collapse across online social media image streams and practices.

Other oppositions also lurked behind this old objective/subjective distinction in photography, significantly here: time and space.³ In the dual-purpose conception of photography, the 'objective' field was primarily linked to the cultural issue of *time*, made explicit in photojournalism and documentary ideas of 'capturing' (a discourse of the hunter) or 'freezing' (the collector), where time is of the essence. The 'subjective' was linked to ideas of *space*, embedded in the process of depicting landscape, buildings, objects and people as all a kind of spatial logic of subjectivity.⁴ Here too in the pre- and post-modern construct of the pictorial tableau, time and space converge as a theoretical axis, which shows them to be a fulcrum point in its theory of the depictive arts or, as Roland Barthes named them, *dioptric arts*: 'the scene, the picture, the shot, the cut-out rectangle'.⁵

Yet despite that history the ghost of the old objective/subjective distinction does constantly haunt photography debates as a problematic, again and again. Photography criticism still operates today through terms such as *staged* and *unstaged*. The very use of the term 'staged' photography, for instance, presumes something else as different and opposite: 'unstaged' photography, which is somehow more *truthful*. Staged and unstaged operate here as a polite synonym for other binaries, subjective/objective, fiction/reality, fantasy/real, or worse, fake/honest. Even though those oppositions are not all equivalent they come together in contemporary photographic discourse as the impoverished sign of the old debates returning, disguised as 'new' ontologies of the photographic image.

Of course, the term 'staging' has an awkward history in photographic discourse. On the one hand it indicates a planned real construction, as 'staging an event', while in another sense in photography it is associated with *fiction*. In some ways this second association is odd. In literature it is entirely normal to consider 'fiction' as a realm of writing practice completely engaged and immersed in life experiences connected to everyday reality. Whilst there are obviously other areas of written fiction linked to fantasy that lack properties of reality (e.g., horror, romance and science fiction), these do not necessarily affect or undermine the general category of the literary term fiction. In photography however, *fiction* and *staging* are often explicitly assumed as negative equivalents of 'false', 'fakery' and 'manipulation' or

even in an ideological-political context as 'propaganda'. In photography, 'staging' still carries the weight and historical baggage of these old uses.

Yet 'staging' is a term that also links positively to the history and ancestral homes of photography, the origins of the photography studios and techniques in theatre staging (use of painted backdrops, props, lighting, etc.), the popular social history of the *tableau vivant*, and the long historical debt owed to its conventions from painting.⁶ It is precisely in the sudden turn to the *tableau image* in postmodernism, a theory of the image derived outside modernism (and its hallowed division of mass culture and high art) and its origins in the Enlightenment, that we can see and trace the then changing position of photography in contemporary culture. The return of the tableau was a recognition of the conceptual changes to these different histories and technologies, their re-evaluation, and their converging transformation in the status of photography, which now includes the contemporary recognition of their emotive value in changing time and space. The photographic image in postmodernism, in effect, turned the concept of staging on its head, advocating its positive role and active use, as for example, via the concept of *mise-en-scène* in theatre and cinema. The concept of the tableau image may remain an object of horror to those working in apparatuses of truth, like documentary and journalism, even though radical realist figures often admired by them, like Bertolt Brecht, were strongly committed to rethinking the practices of 'staging' in their own work.⁷ In the theory and practice of the tableau image, 'fiction' does not abdicate from 'reality', it uses its material in a different way.

The concept of the *tableau* in photography, then, is more than a fancy word for 'picture'; it is symptomatic of a repressed debate: the active role that the photographer plays in staging and the visual arts in general and to the specific alterations in the ideological status of photography as a separate 'medium'. This is why the English translation of the term *tableau* into 'picture' is simply insufficient.⁸ It is not only that it loses the exoticism of the French language, but also any linguistic link to the specific cultural and historical conditions in which it emerged and its crucial theoretical proposals of the *tableau* as a technique for the depiction of human action in its ideal form. In other words, the *tableau* involves the formulation of a whole discourse about the *spatial affectivity* of images and their temporal animation as movement *in the mind* of the spectator.

I *Tableau*

The concept of the tableau was revived in a 1973 essay by Roland Barthes in 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', and a flurry of essays by others published since, some also linking the tableau to the concept of apparatus or *dispositif*.⁹ Barthes's essay draws an equivalence between the use of tableau in the dramatic theories of three very different people as in the title of his essay: 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein'. Denis Diderot (1713–1784) is probably the most unfamiliar in photography circles, a French Enlightenment philosopher, writer and art critic, widely credited for elaborating the *tableau*, although it was already formulating in the writings of others.

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) is the German playwright, poet and theatre director already known in photography criticism, at least via the critical writings of Walter Benjamin who quotes him. Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) is the Soviet (Latvian) filmmaker who, despite his classic films long out of popular fashion, is a crucial theorist for cinematic montage and editing techniques even today. All three figures are significant in the historical formations of European arts of visual culture, which of course were expanded and imported into a complex global legacy today.

Barthes's 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein' essay was concerned to navigate the positionality of the spectator in relation to the functions of geometrical logic of the scene (visual space) and the dramatic moment (temporal instant) of the tableau. Diderot's tableau aesthetics are compared and evaluated with Bertolt Brecht's concept of epic theatre (conceived as 'a succession of tableaux'¹⁰) and Sergei Eisenstein's concept of the cinematic 'shot' and social gest (an ideal meaning in itself) offered as an object for the spectator to criticize rather than to identify with. Barthes:

to discourse (the classics would have said) is simply to depict the tableau one has in one's mind. The scene, the picture, the shot, the cut-out rectangle, here we have the very *condition* that allows us to conceive theatre, painting, cinema, literature, all those arts, that is, other than music and which could be called *dioptric arts*.¹¹

Sounding like an early 'transmedia' theorist, Barthes situates different practices as distinct and separate entities, but conceives them as theoretically linked in their function. As Barthes notes, Denis Diderot's aesthetic theory drew an identification between *painting* and the *theatre*, that is, the scene in the theatre should be as much a pictorial tableau as the staging of a scene in a painting.¹²

Both function as a cut-out segment (the frame) with the aim to say 'something' (social, moral, political, etc.), but are also to be 'moving and conscious of the channels of emotion'.¹³ Although it is notable that Barthes makes no mention of photography it is implicit in the argument, since photography operates at the intersection of cinema, theatre, painting and literature and is thus a pivotal 'medium' among these arts. In effect, Barthes constructs an intermedia dialogue, drawing parallels and transhistorical functions as well as the differences at work in these different cultural practices of image-making, which are all usually separated and buried in their own histories. Barthes argues, in much the same way that a table is laid out for eating, so scenes are laid out for meaning across these practices. The function of the tableau is to construct a presentation, a 'perfect instant' as a given spatially defined event that is full of potential meaning. Barthes cites the classic issue for the single still image:

In order to tell a story, the painter has only an instant at his [sic] disposal, the instant he is going to immobilize on the canvas, and he must thus choose it well, assuring it in advance of the greatest possible yield of meaning and pleasure.¹⁴

It takes very little effort at all to translate this scenario from the painter to a photographer with their camera and computer screen to consider what exact composition and moment (space and time) is to be constructed as the image. The photographic instant is always artificial, staged, constructed, a decision and a choice. Barthes reminds us of the importance of this chosen instant in Diderot's tableau theory, it proposes that 'at a single glance' can be read 'the present, the past and the future; that is the historical meaning of the represented action.'¹⁵ In other words, that instant of the tableau image aims to imply (implant) a temporal sequence in the spectator's mind. This is the instant that defines the tableau image. In Diderot's theory, the action is part of a narrative, a known story. The name of this instant given in Diderot is the 'hieroglyph', and in Brecht and Eisenstein the 'social gest'.¹⁶ Barthes also introduces the more common term 'pregnant moment' from Gotthold Lessing's famous art historical text, *The Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, first published in German in 1766.¹⁷

Lessing's concept of the 'pregnant moment' draws an obvious analogy with the mother's body in pregnancy as a moment of anticipation of birth. While the inherited term for the concept in photography is the 'decisive moment', this notion is usually linked to a fetishism of the shutter and photography as a machine for 'capturing time', rather than any consideration of its consequence as action for meaning.¹⁸ (The only thing that is really 'caught' here is the photographer in the web of meaning they have formulated.)

The question for all the diverse tableau practices (painting, theatre, photography, cinema, computational images) is: what 'instant' is to be depicted? The usual answer is that it should be the decisive *turning point* of the story, when 'everything hangs in the balance', the pregnant moment, or *peripeteia* (the general term derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*). But this answer cannot be separated from the actual organization of the components of the scene itself because the meaning of the tableau is to be found according to Diderot in every component of the tableau scene. This is the reciprocal relation in the theory of the tableau, the axis of time and space: the moment depicted and the dynamic staging of that scene (its space, objects, actors/agents, gestures, postures, costumes and spatial arrangements, of figures décor, etc., whether natural or manufactured) in relation to each other. This is not an empty formal idea. The organization of the scene is dynamic, rhetorical (to instruct, inform and delight), an orchestration of forms and bodies into gestures and juxtaposition that achieve the ideal meaning in precise temporal coordination. Diderot advises students anxious to learn this art:

Tomorrow go to a tavern, and you'll see the real movement of an angry man. ... Look at your two comrades arguing with one another, note how, without their realizing it, it's the dispute that determines the placement of their limbs.¹⁹

It is from such first-hand observation, Diderot argues, that the reality of staging can be learnt. Theatre and painting are drawn from life. Diderot understands that

physical expression is linked to psychological expression, even though there may remain some mystery about their exact meaning. For this reason, the coordination of such bodily gestures into a *tableau* composition should be aimed, he insisted, towards a ‘whole meaning’, the overall effect of the picture on the spectator. The effect of ‘composition’ in the tableau thus aims to propel the spectator into the scene as a site of meaning and any potential story it suggests. Composition of the tableau is not a banal treatise on ‘beautiful form’ for its own sake, a formalist ideology, but a means to formulate a gestalt argument and point-of-view for the spectator.

II Temporality

The single instant to be pictured (drawn, painted, or – we can add since Diderot – photographed, filmed, animated by a computer and so on) is the staging that reveals the narrative event, imagined as *in process* from the viewer’s point-of-view of the scene. Just as a well-chosen *film still* photograph should evoke the film narrative and its characteristics (the lost art of the film poster), so the tableau is linked to the discourse it sets into play. Here Diderot insists on the importance of harmony between the different elements: ‘There isn’t one set of laws for colours, and another for light, and another for shadow; they’re all the same.’²⁰ In this model of composition and harmony, the combination of elements (or *mise-en-scène*) of the tableau, Diderot’s idea is that the coordinates of the tableau scene should touch and animate the imagination directly. Yet the temporality of the single moment is more complex than it first appears. With the historical invention of photography, the notion of ‘instantaneity’ (the snapshot) has eventually become the dominant idea for all pictures.²¹ The instant of the photograph is seen as singular, opposite to historical time, the chronology of historical events and time itself. If the space of an image is defined as a single moment, as its specific instant, then temporality is abolished in the picture.

However, in the theory of the tableau the *instant* depicted is related to the story (the event shown), not to the technology of its presentation.²² In the ideology of photography, especially in realism there is rarely any interest to distinguish between the so-called ‘freezing’ of an instant by the technological process of photography and the scene’s temporality as aesthetic function. The instant depicted is assumed to govern both. Yet the time of the camera shutter (however long or short) and time inside the frame (e.g., the movement of gestures, postures and expressions) are not identical. The ideology of photography has done much to conflate these different types of (technological and cultural) time and to assume they are condensed as the same. Gestures and expressions are seen as singular, all ‘captured’ in *one* moment. Discussion of this requires more nuance in the theory of the tableau. Diderot, for instance, was already sensitive to the idea that gesture is not simply ‘instantaneous’ or singular:

Every action is composed of several moments; but, to repeat what I’ve said before, the artist has only one that lasts no longer than the blink of an eye.

However, just as on a pained face over which joy is beginning to dawn, I find present feeling blended with the residue of past feeling, so, within the moment selected by the painter, postures, expressions, actions, and traces can persist from the preceding moment. A group of associated individuals doesn't register change in a single instant.²³

Earlier in the same text Diderot gives an example: 'A sudden catastrophe surprised a man in the midst of his duties; he's within the catastrophe but doesn't yet abandon his tasks.'²⁴ The character himself is involved in two moments: at work ('a man in the midst of his duties') and a catastrophe not 'registered' ('he's within the catastrophe but doesn't yet abandon his tasks'). The concept of the instant is composed of two meanings in conflict. Present and future co-exist in the single instant of the image.²⁵ We might thus better speak of time, the duration within the instant of the depicted event, not its so-called singularity, no matter how paradoxical all this may seem.

It is in this recognition of temporality in the instant that Diderot was already 'Brechtian' (a critical distance in characters depicted in an event). Barthes concedes that the film actor's gestures in Eisenstein may seem of a 'pathetic' quality. Nevertheless, the actor's expression 'signifies an idea'.²⁶ Barthes, along with Brecht, argues that gesture is the means to meaning. Brecht: 'the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing' and 'everything to do with the emotions has to be externalized; that is to say, it must be developed into a gesture'.²⁷ For Barthes, Brecht's social gest is an adaptation of the pregnant moment, where 'a whole social situation can be read'.²⁸ A renewed interest in these themes can be seen in 1980s 'postmodern' art photography, signified in the poses of human figures, gestures, actions, objects and duration of them in the likes of Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger or even the photographs appropriated by Sherry Levine.²⁹ The work of re-circulating gestures, poses and objects from existing images (already in circulation) in mass media culture, and remediated via the art institution, begins the work of reflecting on this repressed property of photography, which reemerged as an important interest with the return of the tableau form in art.

We might constructively open up the so-called photographic 'instant' to these different temporalities and consider their aspects in conceptions of photographic time. Roland Barthes recognized the temporal conflict in *Camera Lucida* (as argued in the previous chapter) although in an oblique way. Near the end of the book, he writes: 'In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*'.³⁰ We read here a traumatic afterwards in the temporality of the instant, the loss that constitutes the life experience of human time. Diderot and Barthes both describe the register of 'catastrophe' within an image, but in different ways. In Diderot's example, the temporal conflict is within the figure in the image (expressed within its *studium* so to speak), so that it is the figure's conflict (action/expression) that indicates the catastrophe. For Barthes, the catastrophe is provoked by the effect of time on the photograph, the temporal conflict brought

about by the gesture of his young mother and the future anterior experience of her death (the pain of 'his' *punctum* in her) now at the time he looks at her alive.³¹ In Diderot, the effect of time is within the image, in Barthes the effect of time is outside, brought to it in the psychical conflict of time itself (the painful presence/absence of his mother in the photograph). We see that in both instances the affect is produced from the conflict of different temporalities colliding in the same space, what can be called *disjunctive time*. (In Barthes's example, it is the repetition of the trauma of her death.) In these visual interactions with temporality, the trace of one event is translated via memory in another event. Whether these temporal relations are consciously visible (as in the *studium*) or unconscious (*punctum*), the experience of the spectator's *affect* is an effect of the disjunctive temporality in the photographic experience. The present, past and future are inextricably linked in the *temporality* of the tableau instant.³²

Consider the two examples in Figures 3.2 and 3.3 by Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Therese Frare respectively. The first picture, by Greuze, is the second scene of a diptych under the theme of 'The Paternal Curse'. (The other painting is called *The Ungrateful Son*, 1777.) The two paintings depict familial scenes that dramatize two different moments, firstly the departure of the son leaving his family (selfishly to join the army) and then, in *The Punished Son*, he returns too late, only to find his father on his deathbed. Greuze paints the drama of a middle-class family life tragedy. In the 1765 salon review of the *Punished Son* painting, Diderot writes of this scene and the 'son' character:

He's been on campaign, he returns, and at what moment? The moment immediately following his father's death. Everything in the house has changed, it was the abode of poverty, now it's that of pain and misery.³³

The mother gestures the saddened son towards his father as if to ask him to look and see what has happened in his absence, but the son is too distraught to look. Everyone else is distraught, equally gesturing pain and sorrow, except the allegorical dog as signifier of 'fidelity' (on its way out of the house), which is the moral issue of the picture. The open door echoes the heavy drapes above the dead father and makes the contrast between life and death even heavier. The paternal death on one side, the belated return of the prodigal son on the other, this is a family crisis, a scene of misery. To a modern spectator the scene seems theatrical (everyone expresses their emotions vividly in recognizable codified gestures, their positions look choreographed), but to Diderot the scene was innovative and clearly moving, and he notes that in writing about it 'I confess that I've not written it without emotion.'³⁴

Apart from some minor criticisms ('I don't think the mother's actions ring true for this moment; it seems to me she'd have put one of her hands over her eyes'), Diderot thinks this picture is a masterpiece: 'none of the postures is awkward or forced; the actions are true and appropriate for painting'.³⁵ For Diderot it is the harmony of elements that helps to produce the emotional affect of the picture, where the son's belatedness and bereavement evoke the feelings of pain and misery



FIGURE 3.2 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Punished Son*, 1778. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



FIGURE 3.3 Therese Frare, 'Final Moments' (David Kirby), 1990.



FIGURE 3.4 United Colors of Benetton S/S 1992 advertisement. Photograph by Therese Frare. Concept: Oliviero Toscani.

when he looks at the tableau painting. But it is also the subject matter, the secular family and its contemporary life that interests Diderot, as the similar themes in his own plays and novels also testify. A crisis in paternal authority, the role of the mother and a question of the place of children, all repeat themselves as themes across his work.

Of course, the title of the painting, *The Punished Son*, also points the viewer to a discursive dimension of narrative, the relations between different generations of a family: between the mother and son, the father and his children, the children to each other and to their parents. These are universal themes (Oedipus), the family drama and the inevitability of death and its consequences for those around it. These are presented as one given instant, but open on to a multiplicity of narrative implications.

Now consider the documentary scene in Therese Frare's famous photograph, of David Kirby's dying moment, published in *Life* magazine in November 1990 (Figure 3.3). Her picture deals directly, like Greuze's painting, with the tragic theme of death in a family – a scene whose intimate space is still often taboo in visualization (unless a news issue from other parts of the world), seen as morally offensive or intrusive. The photographic scene, coordinated in composition, is clear in meaning and direct: the father mourns his son as their mother consoles her daughter. There is no doubt as to the narrative moment depicted, derived from the gestures, expressions and postures of the figures involved. (As in Greuze's painting, the mother is also curiously framed against a door entrance in Frare's composition.) But in this story, it is the father who mourns for his dead son. The two groups lean slightly apart, the isolated masculine pain of death on the left (a discrete arm leads the viewer in and out of the picture to the priest's 'elsewhere') and a feminine realm of mutual consolation on the right. The photograph has all the pathos and pain of Greuze's tableau, people who are photographed living the pain of death. This is how *Life* magazine described the photograph at the time:

his body wasted by AIDS, his gaze locked on something beyond this world – surrounded by anguished family members as he took his last breaths. The haunting image of Kirby on his death bed, taken by a journalism student named Therese Frare, quickly became the one photograph most powerfully identified with the HIV/AIDS epidemic that, by then, had seen millions of people infected (many of them unknowingly) around the globe.³⁶

The monochrome photograph was famously re-circulated as a hand-coloured version in a famous series of Benetton clothing advertising images. The company bought 'issue-based' documentary photographs that (they claimed) would highlight social issues around the world (in this case HIV) and were subsequently displayed in magazines and on billboards around the world.

The spectator becomes a witness to this death of a young man amidst his grieving family. The discursive logic of the picture is to make us feel the pain of this

death of a family member, on this occasion a son, in what one critic described as an ‘incredibly epic and devastating moment’.³⁷ Diderot would have approved. Like Greuze’s paintings, the gestures and poses of the family members in this photograph create a coherent ‘tableau’ image. To speak of the efficiency of the tableau as a vehicle for meaning is to say that it is less dependent on its will to ‘truth’ than its ability to trigger identifiable meanings and emotions, an empathetic conviction about pain and suffering. The tableau photograph, just as in painting before it, organizes emotions into recognizable social conventions and meanings, even if it is difficult to name them all verbally.

Certainly, despite the obvious social, technical and historical differences between Greuze’s tableau and Frare’s death scene, both pictures are vehicles for stories of death in the family, very different stories in time and space of family pain.

Whether a painting, photograph, theatrical scene, or film still, the tableau is not a primitive version of cinema, but a specific form of signification, whose stillness evokes temporality, one closer to the processes of the dream-image, in day-dreams or night-dreams, as theorized in Sigmund Freud’s theory of the ‘dream-work’.³⁸ The still image, in its very stillness offers this potential for temporal disjunction, culturally, psychically, ideologically, in which the disjunctive ‘structures of feeling’ heighten and animate the spectator’s subjective spatial-temporal relations and position within the scene as a participant viewer. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich put it:

Do we not beg the most important question when we ask what ‘really happens’ at any point of time? We therewith assume that what Harris called a *punctum temporis* really exists, or more radically, that what we really perceive is the infinite sequence of such static points in time.³⁹

James Harris’s concept of the *punctum temporis* from 1744 might be brought forward to consider the problem of the photographic instant, still bedeviled by the ideology of photographic ‘instantaneity’ (even in our ‘image-computational’ era) and ignoring the duration of its contents. In his 1744 essay ‘A Discourse on Music, Painting and Poetry’, Harris had already noted that the painter only had one instant to depict the story or event. The name he gives this instant is the *punctum temporis*: ‘For of necessity every Picture is a *Punctum Temporis* or Instant.’⁴⁰ Harris elaborates:

The Reason is that a *Picture* being (as has been said) but a *Point* or *Instant*, in a *Story well known*[,] the *Spectator’s* Memory will supply the previous and the subsequent. But this cannot be done, *where such knowledge is wanting*. And therefore it may be justly questioned whether the most celebrated Subjects, borrowed by Painting from History, would have been any of them intelligible thro’ the *Medium of Painting* only, supposing History to have been silent, and to have given us no *additional information*.⁴¹

(Italics in original.)

Harris summarizes the condition of all still images, that the stillness of the picture relates to discourse, or what he calls 'History', those stories that culture supplies to the spectator who then appears to 'animate' them from pictures themselves. The spectator must know the story already, Harris claims. But what if the spectator does not already know the story? What becomes of the picture or the story for that matter?⁴² The issue of the spectator's cultural knowledge is crucial here. However, we may advance a different conclusion from Harris's conception of the distinction between the already known and unknown story. The categories of *studium* and *punctum* can be re-integrated in a different way.

The question is how are we to account for interest in an image where there is no obvious story? It is doubtful that any picture which evokes reverie in the mind of the viewer can do so unless something is *already known*. So, where there is no *known* story of a picture, there must be something else, something enigmatic (another signification process?) at work within a picture that activates the interest and imagination of the viewer.

We may advance the thesis that while it is the *studium* of a picture that points to the *known* narrative (the image as recognizable fragment-moment of it), it is the *punctum* that triggers the *unknown* event (one whose material relates to the spectator's personal experience), but not as a conscious story, i.e., is not known or recognized as such – is unconscious, repressed and 'forgotten' by the spectator. The distinction here is not if a story can be narrated from a single image, but the different origins of it: whether the story is *implicitly* signified (it can only be inferred) in the discourse of the tableau (as a pre-determined cultural narrative), or whether the signifier triggers a fantasy imagined in the mind of the viewer. Harris's concept of the *punctum temporis* usefully links us forward to the thinking of Barthes to join the complexity of *temporis* (time) in the tableau 'instant' to the enigma of the *punctum* in Barthes.

III Scene/moment

To summarize, all the literature on the tableau points to three fundamental issues. First, staging, as the question of the composition of the scene, including its point-of-view for the viewer (the camera position and angle, lens, focus, colour profile, etc.) and all the features that today would be summarized as the work of *mise-en-scène*, props, actors and agents, scenery and lighting, etc. The second is the issue of the instant of a story or event to be depicted, the moment shown, the 'instant' (variously conceptualized as the 'pregnant moment', the social gest, the fugitive image, the 'decisive moment') or *peripeteia*. The dynamic interaction of these two components, the *spatial* staging of the tableau (and the viewpoint dictated to the spectator by it) and the *temporal* moment or point of the external story/event depicted (the *peripeteia*), are combined to form the third issue: the ideological outlook of the picture, including its emotional and realistic effect.

Yet Diderot adds another dimension, anticipating later theory on the role of the spectator in looking at pictures, when he declares: 'Our mind is a *tableau mouvant*' (moving tableau).⁴³ The theory of the tableau thus has these related components:

the tableau scene arranged for the spectator, the particular instant depicted as the event of meaning, and its effect in and on the active mind of the spectator. It is here that the fantasy animation of a still image merges into subjective narrative, intertwining personal time with the *punctum temporis* of the image.

Consider a photograph by Stephen Shore, 'Washington Street, Watertown, New York, August 1, 1974' (Figure 3.5). A woman figure is shown mid-stride, her foot 'frozen' above the ground about to be planted on it.⁴⁴



FIGURE 3.5 Stephen Shore, 'Washington Street, Watertown, New York, August 1, 1974'. Chromogenic colour print. Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York.

The photograph has all the features of a tableau image even if the photographer has no relation to the concept. Like other pictures published in Shore's 1982 book *Uncommon Places*, according to the back cover endorsement the photograph shows the 'art of the dead-pan – rejecting exotic compositions, artful editing or facile simplification'.⁴⁵

In the photograph the figure wears a green check colour costume, an outfit caught in light and shadow as her figure is too. A sort of 'similitude' of green pervades the image, the green grass, uncut plants and trees, all slightly darker green than her outfit. A chiaroscuro light falls across her as she walks out of the shadow, a series of visual contrasts that help to situate her in the suburban environment, but also distinguishes her from it.

Diderot in fact spends several pages on the merits of chiaroscuro in his essay 'Notes on Painting' (published after his review of the paintings in the 1765 Salon). He insists on the importance of harmony between the different elements: 'There isn't one set of laws for colours, and another for light, and another for shadow; they're all the same.'⁴⁶ In this model of harmony, the rhetorical combination of elements (antithesis, similitude, etc.) that today we call composition (or otherwise the *mise-en-scène*) of a scene, whether in painting, photography or cinema, the 'staging' should converge into a harmonious whole, which in Diderot's idea are coordinated to touch the imagination directly.

We see such techniques at work here in Shore's image. Whatever mode of production is used to make the photograph, its 'staging' combines the elements of the image into a unified whole. The 'frozen' figure seems to walk forward frontally. Her gaze is firmly orientated forward along the pavement ahead and past the camera as though it is not there. 'We' spectators are not there but the camera is. At the same time the pavement forms a vista in the distance whose horizon is ultimately out-of-focus. In her right hand a heavy looking bag (her arm seems taut and stretched) is cast in the sunlight, her left arm swung back in shadow, which appears to balance the gravity of a heavy bag. Her left leg, bathed in light, strides forward with its white shoe hovering above the ground. It is a matter of experience to 'know' this foot will touch the ground in the next instant. We anticipate this future moment in our mind. The mid-stride pose shows her advance, but its stillness amplifies this idea of the forward movement along the suburb pavement. It allows us to think about the literal and metaphorical 'path ahead' (her future). The shallow focus adds to this dramatic moment and the anticipated step forward makes it easy to *animate* this figure's 'walk' in our mind. We can *imagine* her movement forward.

We might then well ask: 'where is she going?' This is indeed a question likely to be asked. The answer of course is withheld. We simply don't know from looking at the image. The written caption below the picture simply reveals its location: *Watertown*, which according to Google is a wealthy city in New York state that was formerly the land of native Iroquois, Onondaga and Mohawk territory. By adding this information, I enrich the context of the scene, but it adds nothing to her action or this moment in her life, only its location. We may guess from this and her costume that she is going to or returning from work. Perhaps she has been shopping, or visiting someone, we simply do not know. It is possible to elaborate such speculations into a more complex narrative, a story animated by the specific details in the image and invest them with our own discursive (social, historical, personal) knowledge as a social fantasy of the image. In the American Dream it is said that it is possible to advance yourself whoever you are. A photograph offers the liberty to advance a fantasy, whoever you are. Viewed today this photograph echoes the chronology of time in a completely different way from 1974 when the picture was taken, and when published in *Uncommon Places* in 1982.

Thus far is the obvious 'studious' aspect of the image, its social meaning. The photograph constructs a cultural scenario in which the viewer may activate the image, its 'social gest' (according to the knowledge brought to it) and can propel

these meanings into the plot of narrative convention. The point here is that fantasy occupies a privileged place in relation to the subjectivity of the spectator. The horizon of fantasy in such narrative scenarios is not governed by the explicit content of the picture (even though we may agree on its 'obvious content'), but by the spectator's imaginary and their desire – motivation – mobilized via the image. The object of fantasy is not the scene 'depicted', rather, the tableau image (and its frozen social gest) is the vehicle of its activation. This means that, like Barthes's *punctum*, the historical concept of *punctum temporis* relates to two temporalities. The first is what is triggered by the photograph and the second, the imaginary story that already exists (for that spectator), albeit one not necessarily consciously present. To make this formulation more vivid and to elaborate the proposition with an example, I turn to a well-known literary text, where a single image is shown to be the complex foundation of two temporalities.

IV A figure caught in their stride

The story is Wilhelm Jensen's 1902 German novella, *Gradiva: A Pompeian Fantasy*, which centres on the image of a *figure caught in their stride*.

In a synopsis of the story, the main character is a young archaeology student named Norbert. He is obsessed exclusively with his work to the neglect of all other social interests. One day at work he sees a Roman bas-relief image that depicts a young woman walking mid-stride. He names this figure Gradiva, meaning 'she who walks'. Although Norbert has no idea why he is so fixated by it, particularly her raised foot, he becomes more and more fascinated by the image, and begins to fantasize about it. Although the figure of Gradiva is clearly Roman, in his fantasies she becomes Greek. But he re-locates her in the Roman ruins of Pompeii in Italy, the one place where he has carried out archeological fieldwork. In a dream he sees Gradiva in Pompeii at the precise historical moment of the volcanic eruption that suddenly covered the city in ash and Gradiva is buried in it too. In that odd discontinuous manner of dreams, Norbert then departs for Italy himself. The narrator of the story makes the point that he travels alone, but is surrounded by many honeymooning couples on a classical antiquities tour, which arrives eventually in Pompeii. After a number of disconcerting and disorientating spatial experiences common to tourists, he finds himself alone at noon in a deserted part of the city (Casa di Castore e Polluce). Here the figure Gradiva appears and walks before him.

In what the reader now realizes is Norbert's hallucination of Gradiva in a dream, he approaches and speaks to her in Latin and Greek, languages he was familiar with as an archeologist. Without any surprise, she asks him to speak in his own native German instead. The shift to German language is significant. It will turn out in the story that Gradiva is in fact the displaced figure of another woman previously known to Norbert from his childhood, called Zoë Bertgang. What ensues is a tussle between Zoë and Norbert as to the recognition of her real identity (not unlike Scottie's obsession in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*⁴⁷). To indulge Norbert, Zoë re-enacts the pose for him, appeasing his fixation on the Gradiva image and

her walking posture. Then, as the story concludes, they settle into a relationship. The final lines of the short story read:

A merry, comprehending, laughing expression lurked around his companion's mouth, and raising her dress slightly with her left hand, *Gradiva rediva* Zoë Bertgang, viewed by him with dreamily observing eyes, crossed with her calmly buoyant walk, through the sunlight, over the stepping stones, to the other side of the street.⁴⁸

Jensen's story, redolent of the era's male fetishism, reveals and *realizes* the substitutive compulsion animated by the fixed bas-relief image of the Roman woman. The fixation on this image in his work (archaeology) reveals another hidden passion and narrative fantasy. The archaeologist has found out something from a historical inquiry that he didn't expect, something about himself.

The relevant point of the story is the way the 'fixed' image is animated by its viewer, and in a trajectory based in a forgotten memory, Zoë Bertgang from his childhood. The forgotten memory is re-activated by a picture (the bas-relief of *Gradiva*) but then, as fantasy begins a transformative process (one displacement after another), to culminate in the return of the forgotten figure as a living being. We may abstract from Jensen's tale of *Gradiva* and the character's fixation on her pose to the general proposition that the image of a specific fixed gesture may trigger the *punctum temporis* of a personal story. In this sense, the *punctum temporis* is less a conventional narrative than a psychological episode, its meanings animated by the spectator, and psychically specific to that person.

In Sigmund Freud's 1907 essay on Jensen's *Gradiva*, 'Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*', he points to the way a 'childhood impression' has been 'stirred up' by the image, but 'remained "unconscious"'.⁴⁹ Freud notes two sources of the impression, one conscious, the other unconscious. The conscious source is Norbert's *archeological* interest in the image, which serves 'as a pretext for the unconscious erotic one', where 'science had put itself completely at the service of the delusion'.⁵⁰ Like the enigma of Barthes's *punctum*, it is the *studium* that serves as pretext to the unconscious interest. Without remembering or knowing the source, the subject repeats the same compulsion (as 'symptom') which drives or even defines their behaviour. The past is reproduced without conscious knowledge of it. The story of *Gradiva* dramatizes the process of an unconscious past (Zoë) becoming conscious, revealed bit by bit through dreams and hallucinations.

This is early Freud (one his first analyses of a work of art/literature): a repressed erotic memory re-appears in the sublimated and obsessive work (archaeology), the conscious image of *Gradiva* (bas-relief image), where Zoë returns to occupy his fantasy life unconsciously. The libidinal impulse forces itself through into his work (the image of *Gradiva*) to become the object of desire. (Zoë is situated like an analyst, absorbing the transference, *Gradiva*.) The uncanny 'return of the repressed' brings the material back into conscious memory.

A second view, less interested in analysing the novella, would be to note the reversal of time. It is the historical image of Gradiva in the present that reawakens his future interest in Zoë. In the death of one figure (Gradiva's death in Pompeii) another emerges, and so the sliding of desire goes on, to her eventual 'rebirth' as Zoë. The past returns to restructure the present-future. In effect, what we might call the 'figure caught in their stride' scene, a figure (male, female, etc.) shown mid-step walking (away, towards or across the image), as in the Roman bas-relief of Gradiva, shows the disjunctive time at work in the 'instant' of the tableau image, its *peripeteia*.⁵¹

This is not to reduce all those other walking figures to the same fate or condemn them to the same story, the retrieval of a lost memory-trace, by Norbert. However, it is to recognize the *process* of desire and *structure* of fantasy at work in driving the substitutions and refraction of one image in another one. Certainly not all fantasies belong to the narrative articulated by Jensen, and it would be wrong to suppose that any image-fragment evokes the same structure of desire. (There are so many other potential narratives at work than merely getting a couple together in a story.) We might find, for example, the trace of a 'compulsion to repeat' that is at the core of trauma theory. In the theory of trauma, a 'compulsion to repeat' is a feature of traumatic events, where the participant has yet to understand the mobilizing force of the repeated act.⁵² While drawn to it repeatedly, it is without knowing why. Like Barthes's compulsive *punctum*, the spectator, or for that matter a photographer, may be drawn to a particular image or certain part-image signifiers, even though its meaning is unknown to them. The effect of these disjunctive temporalities, the past in the present, is what establishes the proximity of the tableau to the structure of fantasy.

I am not suggesting that this particular story of Jensen's *Gradiva* is in any way the unconscious story, fantasy or intention of Stephen Shore's image, or any other of the many photographs by other photographers of 'figures caught in their stride'.⁵³ Indeed, there are so many other psychological narratives than Jensen's archaeological fantasy *Gradiva*, a story that serves to unite a young heterosexual couple together. My point is to show the way any culturally specific 'gest', the *punctum temporis* of the tableau image, may open out onto a complex temporality of narrative-fantasy by the viewer. An event woven from known and unknown elements (*studium* and *punctum*) of the photograph, where past, present and future are triggered and reorganized via the specific features of the image-fix. The *studium* as social meaning and *punctum temporis* as past in the present operate together in a dialectic of cultural time.

In his essay on 'Time and the Other', Jean Laplanche introduced a nuance into the idea of Freudian temporality, that analysis is a 'going back over which dissolves, which resolves, and not a going back'.⁵⁴ In this, his conception of 'afterwardness' does much to re-structure thinking about the process of temporality in human experience. In particular, the way that early experiences that were not understood at the time (as 'enigmatic signifiers') are reactivated later, unconsciously. Such signifiers do not determine the future but are 're-translated' in and through later experiences. Here we can see the work that needs to be done on photography. Enjoyment, even if only of a colour or a particular shaped hand, for instance, may be of something gained in childhood and later given value, if not yet any explicit signified meaning. We may

say the same of other examples of *peripeteia*, the ‘social gest’, part-objects of a scene that signify not only as fixed iconographic cultural codes, but as a myriad of personal significations too that speak in their silent presence afterwards. The theory of the *tableau* introduces another dimension (closer to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the *real*), the *punctum temporis* of the still image. One way to understand the repetition of these tableau instants is as fragments of a common story, social yet also individual: those key transitory evocative moments of human experience. In the field of the tableau and its ‘staged’ scene, we would then have to ask, what does this scene want of me?

Notes

- 1 The problems of categorical distinction have not been resolved; Nathan Jurgenson for example, in a chapter on ‘Documentary Vision’, maintains the old notion of documentary in his recent book, despite the acknowledged subjectivization of image processing (filters, etc.) on social media: ‘By being quick the temporary photograph is a tiny protest against time.’ See Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (London: Verso, 2019), 50.
- 2 Opposition to postmodernist discourse opposed such debate of these normative binary distinctions. In the polemics on photography of the period the shattering of such distinctions was perceived as reckless and given a warning: ‘in the “anything goes” world of the postmodern the one thing that does go is the coherence of arguments’. Clinging to old arguments and their paradigms, however, was never a way to forge new ones. Quote from Steve Edwards, ‘Snapshooters of History’ (*Ten*.8, no 32, 1989), reprinted in Liz Wells, ed., *The Photography Reader: History and Theory*, second edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 272.
- 3 Peter Wollen characterizes the distinction between still and moving images in his essay ‘Fire and Ice’: ‘News photographs are perceived as signifying events. Art photographs and most documentary photographs signify states.’ Wollen’s article is about the aesthetics of cinema and photography, ostensibly between moving and still images: as fire and ice. See Peter Wollen, ‘Fire and Ice’, reprinted in Wells, ed., *The Photography Reader*, 196. I have used here the term *space*; Wollen uses ‘states’. If we were more specific about modernism and photography, it could also be ‘shapes’ too; in modernism the old opposition was between form/content, where ‘content’ as such was of less or little interest, usually subjugated to the formal plane of image composition.
I would also argue, in contrast to Wollen that documentary is split across the two categories, in fact overlaps them so as to require a third category. If we consider the broad historical tendencies of social documentary, it acts to produce dynamic relations differently using both description of social conditions and images to temporalize them, with the actions of social agents pictured in the photographs. However, for the purposes of this chapter I have linked documentary as based in signifying *events*.
- 4 Classic examples of time-based photography photojournalism would be Robert Capa, Frances Benjamin Johnston and Helen Levitt, and Dorothea Lange and Henri Cartier-Bresson in documentary photography. In art photography Eugene Atget, Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham are celebrated examples of space-based art photography. (Even though Atget claimed himself to only make ‘documents’, the legacy of his work is nevertheless a foundational contribution to art photography. See David Bate, ‘Art of the Document’ in *Art Photography* (London: Tate Publications, 2015).
- 5 Roland Barthes, ‘Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein’, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 90.
- 6 See, for example, Lori Pauli, ed. *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre* (London: Merrell, 2006).
- 7 Brecht certainly admired Diderot’s work and Lessing’s too, for their inclusion of both instruction and entertainment (knowledge and pleasure) in equal measure within the

dynamics of their work. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 131–132. On *mise-en-scène* in photography see David Bate, 'Mise-en-Scène of Desire' in *Mise-en-Scène*, ed. Kate Bush (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1994).

- 8 The concept of the pictorial tableau is thus more than about the simple harmonious arrangement of figures, objects and visual planes into a frontal geometrical presentation, as it is sometimes conceived (something that any camera helps to organize 'automatically'), it is also a philosophical principle of representation involving concepts of space and time in the visual arts. As such it differs from the origins of the English term 'picture', which is associated with the latin *pictura* and the perspectival logic of the 'window on the world' thesis from the Italian Renaissance in Leon Battista Alberti's famous treatise *De pictura* [*On Painting*], 1435, published in 1450. The concept of the *tableau* has a different history in the later European Enlightenment era of the 1700s and new conceptions of the visibility of images.
- 9 See Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein' (1973), *Image–Music–Text* (London: Fontana, 1982), The essay 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein' is actually dedicated to the French screenwriter and film director André Techiné, whose post-New Wave French cinema was particularly concerned with the complexity of emotions in human existence. Indicative key essays on the tableau in relation to the photographic image are Victor Burgin, 'Diderot, Barthes, *Vertigo*', *The End of Art Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1986); François Chevrier (a once student of Barthes), 'The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography' (1989), reprinted in Douglas Fogle, ed., *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 2004); Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Laura Lisbon 'Notes on the Tableau', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2013, Vol 12 no 1, 77–86.
- 10 Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', 72.
- 11 Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', 70.
- 12 Wolfgang Schivelbusch characterizes the shift as the eighteenth century casting off its 'baroque heritage' and notes succinctly: 'Suddenly people realised that in its management of light the stage had lagged far behind painting, which had been creating impressive chiaroscuro effects for more than a hundred years.' See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, translated by Angela Davies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 192.
Diderot's 'manifesto' for theatre appears in his *Conversations* of 1757: 'To change the arrangement of the stage, to substitute tableaux for [instead of] *coups de theater*, a new source of invention for the poet and for study for the actor', cited in Graham Ley, 'The Significance of Diderot', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol 11, no 44 (November 1995), 348.
- 13 Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', 70.
- 14 Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', 73.
- 15 Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', 73.
- 16 Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', 73. Roland Barthes also refers to the 'hieroglyph' in his essay on Fourier as 'pregnant depth'. See Roland Barthes, *Sade/Loyola/Fourier*, translated by R. Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1971), 95–99.

In a critique of Barthes's argument, Victor Burgin suggests that Barthes conflates 'pregnant moment' in Lessing with Diderot's concept of 'hieroglyph'. For Diderot, the hieroglyph means something that 'communicates instantaneously and stands *outside* discourse'; Burgin notes that this idea points to Barthes's own concept of the 'obscure meaning' in still photographs, and what later becomes the *punctum*. The private meaning of the *punctum* (or personal affect of Diderot's hieroglyph) is consequently separate from the notion of the *peripeteia* or pregnant moment, which is the vehicle for the narrative sense of the tableau, as its 'obvious' meaning or *studium*.

Burgin importantly distinguishes between two strands of argument about pictures, between a picture that 'sums up an entire event in one scene or one that holds a meaning beyond what words can express'. Victor Burgin, 'Diderot, Barthes, *Vertigo*', 130.

I am indebted to his work on this distinction. However, I wish to take another path, which means stepping back into the issues raised by the eighteenth-century theories

therein of the still image, in order to come forward again. I want to argue the two concepts (the summary of a narrative event and extra-discursive meaning) are different, but not mutually exclusive, but in fact mutually co-dependent in Barthes's *studium/punctum* dynamic in relation to temporality, as I have argued in Chapter 2 and here.

- 17 In a later essay on the same Laocoön sculpture in 1798, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe formulated a similar thesis: 'A fugitive moment should be pitched upon; no part of the whole ought to be found before in this position and, in a little time after, every part should be obliged to quit that position, it is by this means that the work be always animated for millions of spectators.' See Peter Wollen, 'Time, Image and Terror' in Carolyn Bailey Gill, ed., *Time and the Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 149.

In a commentary on this passage by the film theorist, Peter Wollen, he remarks, 'Goethe's "fugitive moment" is plainly Lessing's "pregnant moment"' (defined in his own famous text on the Laocoön sculpture) and, in our time, we recognize it as Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment"; 'Time, Image and Terror', 149. Victor Burgin had already linked these concepts in 1986. See Burgin, 'Diderot, Barthes, *Vertigo*'.

- 18 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Images à la sauvette* (Paris: Éditions Verve, 1952), The translation of *sauvette* is perhaps closer to the sense of Goethe's 'fugitive image' than to the usual English 'decisive moment'.
- 19 Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art, Volume 1: The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting*, translated by John Goodman (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 195.
- 20 Diderot, *Diderot on Art*, 206.
- 21 Even though the impressionists started the ideas of instantaneity in painting, the idea was already a 'photographic' idea of time.
- 22 The argument that 'instantaneity' only becomes of interest with the invention of photography is certainly not borne out by history. The English painter Turner, for example, had painted seascape where the waves were mid-crest, as though 'caught' by a camera *before* photography was invented.
- 23 Denis Diderot, 'Notes on Painting', *Diderot on Art, Volume I*, 223.
- 24 Diderot, 'Notes on Painting', 220–221.
- 25 Someone might claim it's the past and present, but the temporal splitting is the same
- 26 Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, 75.
- 27 See Brecht on Theatre, 139.
- 28 Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, 73–74.
- 29 See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* (London: Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009).
- 30 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 96.
- 31 Barthes sees in the photographic image of his mother as a child some primary memory of her 'as his mother' (her gaze?), yet this memory is overlain by her death, which at the time of the picture is logically in her future: it had '*already happened*' at the point Barthes is writing about the *punctum* of this image. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.
- 32 The temporality of 'human time' involved in these operations relates to what has been theorized as *afterwardsness* in the psychoanalytic conception of time. See 'Notes on Afterwardsness' in Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 33 Diderot, *Diderot on Art, Volume 1*, 107.
- 34 Diderot, *Diderot on Art, Volume 1*, 108.
- 35 Diderot, *Diderot on Art, Volume 1*, 108.
- 36 <http://life.time.com/history/the-story-behind-the-photo-that-changed-the-face-of-aids/#ixzz2RU9ryH3K> (accessed January 2015).
- 37 Maira Kalman, see: http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0106/voices_kalman.htm (accessed January 2015).
- 38 The classic/standard reading on this in Sigmund Freud's oeuvre is his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Pelican Freud Library, Vol 4 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980) and 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908) in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, Vol 14, Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985).

- 39 See Ernst Gombrich, 'Moment and Movement in Art', *The Image and the Eye* (London: Phaidon, 1994), 45. Oddly, having introduced this, Gombrich goes on to reject this proposition, based on a simple idea of technological time (e.g., 24 frames a second of cinema) reduced to the consciousness of perceptual time (in cinema, the 'illusion of movement'). More recent work has refuted this in a number of ways, and not least already the older work of Goethe on sculpture and Diderot on painting and the theatre. See, for instance: Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002); Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, translated by Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); and Laura Mulvey, *Death 24× a Second* (London: Reaktion, 2006).
- 40 James Harris, *A Discourse on Music, Painting and Poetry* (London: F. Wingrave, 1744), 63.
- 41 Harris, *A Discourse on Music, Painting and Poetry*, 64–65.
- 42 Ernst Gombrich the art historian addresses this as a question of 'non-verbal communication': 'there must be a great difference between a painting that illustrates a known story and another that wishes to tell a story. No history exists of this second category, the so-called anecdotal painting which flourished most in the nineteenth-century salon pictures.' See Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 101–104.
- 43 Denis Diderot, cited in Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 179.
- 44 Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 59.
- 45 Endorsement text for Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places* by Robert Venturi, back cover.
- 46 Diderot, *Diderot on Art, Volume I*, 206.
- 47 See Victor Burgin's work on this in his own artworks and essays in 'Diderot, Brecht, *Vertigo*' and *Components of a Practice* (Milan: Skira, 2008).
- 48 Wilhelm Jensen / Sigmund Freud, *Gradiva* / 'Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*' (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1993), 117–118.
- 49 Sigmund Freud, 'Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*' (1907), *Art and Literature*, Pelican Freud Library, Vol 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 72.
- 50 Freud, 'Delusion and Dream', 76.
- 51 Peter Wollen has argued that Goethe had noted this aspect in relation to *The Laocoön* sculpture (the same one that Lessing had written about). Each of the three figures in the sculpture are in 'successive stages' of relation to the serpent attacking them, each of these three 'graduated situations' (Goethe's phrase) 'provokes a different response from the viewer.' Peter Wollen, *Time and the Image*, ed. Carolyn Gill (Manchester University Press, 2000), 151.

Wollen also draws out the way Goethe highlights the three figures as representing different relations to suffering in his textual analysis of the sculpture as fear, terror, and compassion. Wollen links these different relations to instances to the cinema, specifically the famous moments of 'suspense' in Alfred Hitchcock's films. However, since, Goethe's pivotal 'fugitive moment' clearly recognizes the *duration* of an event inside the 'single instant' of the static *Laocoön* sculpture, I want to argue that it is a characteristic of the peripeteia instant to be 'poly-gestural' by which is meant that there is a duration, or *disjunctive time* involved at the heart of the effective tableau image.
- 52 See for example, Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) and Griselda Pollock, *After-affects/After-images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
- 53 Like others, no doubt, I have often been struck by the repetition of specific motifs, postures, gestures and framing, etc., in a particular photographer's work, or repeated across numerous photographers' works in different times and places, without any apparent knowledge or acknowledgement. The 'figure caught in their stride' is one such iconographic motif, seen across numerous works by artists and photographers. Another history needs to be written here on these myriad of gestures, poses and fixed repetitions in photography.
- 54 Laplanche, *Otherness*, 258.



FIGURE 4.1 Film still from *The Da Vinci Code*.

4

THE LACTATION OF MEANING: JEFF WALL

The issue of visual image interpretation and the method of understanding meanings have preoccupied the visual arts ever since its invention. Until the re-emergence of semiotics in the 1960s the main tradition for interpreting works of art had come from the Warburg circle. The interpretation of visual art finds itself to be part of a far wider cultural practice, the popular passion for detectives, as characters in novels, cinema, television who can solve obscure or horrific crimes: forensic experts aided by scientific tools from fingerprints to DNA tests and from photographs to mobile phone data forensics. The same passion for these brilliant sleuths cannot be said of the recent history and theory of photography.

If there was any redeeming feature at all in Dan Brown's popular 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code* and subsequent (2006) film franchise, it was that an academic art historian could be elevated to the status of a super-sleuth in detective fiction. His novel evoked a fascination with the activity of 'de-coding' the hidden signs of historical art and architecture.¹ The main character, an 'art world celebrity', Robert Langdon is a professor of art history in Paris, who teaches at 'The American University of Paris'. At the beginning of the movie, Langdon (played by Tom Hanks) is seen giving a lecture at the Louvre in Paris, France, where he shows a number of slide images. In his lecture he argues that in visual art religious symbols, like the Christian cross or the swastika, can have a *plurality* of different historical meanings derived from and attributed to them. Effectively, this fictional academic of the story invokes the well-known concept of the *polysemic image*, as advanced by Roland Barthes in the 1960s.² Meaning and significance are given, not from any intrinsic code in the image, but rather from their interplay with the specific cultural discourse of meanings given to them in any particular society or social framework. In short, the pictorial element of an image (described in semiotics as 'the signifier') is given a meaning ('signified') in the verbal/linguistic cultural

discourse in which it is circulated and operated. After Langdon's initial lecture proposition is established (an image has a plural and contingent meaning), the plot of the *Da Vinci Code* effectively sets out on a path to show that there is *another* set of meanings hidden from view in the established discourse of art historical knowledge in certain paintings and architectural signifiers. (The plot reveals a trail of hidden fixed meanings in images about royal bloodlines.) The ingenious historical conceit of the story is that what we see or know about an image or object by looking at it is not the real truth: there is another hidden and repressed signification and meaning behind what we think we know. The story encourages the idea, perhaps inadvertently, that the interpretation of visual art should aim to discover the hidden reality that lies behind the more obvious meanings, which are a façade presented in art history as one set of meanings that in fact cover over others, thus are complicit with various institutional conspiracies. We have no doubt become familiar with such plots and conspiracies as part of everyday social media life: photographic images circulate as specific messages that the knowing subject can claim have duplicitous meanings, secret messages, coded signs and symbols that reveal a hidden truth about the world. As such, Robert Langdon figures as sort of a precursor 'super-art historian', able to read and deconstruct 'beyond the readings of other art historians', a quality established in the text not only by his cult social status but in the fact that he has supposedly written a string of books, of which two are interestingly called *The Lost Language of Ideograms* and *Religious Iconology*. Such is the realm of the expert.

I Iconology

Iconology is, of course, the famous art historical tradition of interpretation used by the 'Warburg circle', the work of Aby Warburg and the custodians of his tradition: Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich in particular. According to Panofsky, the work of iconology separates 'appreciation' (the collector) and 'connoisseurship' (the museum curator) from 'art theory', which demands 'a mental faculty comparable to that of a diagnostician'.³ Iconology is different from iconography. Whereas *iconography* is an analysis that identifies the basic subject matter and meaning of works of art from their formal aspect (i.e., a female figure as Venus), *iconology* is the more demanding art of grasping the meaning of the whole and demands different skills. Panofsky regarded iconology as a 'higher' form of analysis, as the work of understanding an individual picture in relation to a 'programme' or the work of art 'as a whole'.⁴ Whereas *iconography* is dependent on matching images with their discursive texts and is mostly based on the evidence of documents and texts, *iconology* depends on the wits of the interpreter. This diagnostic ambition needs what Panofsky called a 'synthetic intuition'. By 'synthetic' he means that the interpreter has to draw upon their knowledge of various discourses, like poetics, history, politics, religious, philosophical and social tendencies to intuit the meanings in the work of art into a whole interpretative framework: a *synthesis* of the meaning of the work of art. 'Intuition' is not to be trusted purely by itself and is to

be controlled via iconographic analysis. To clarify all this Panofsky ends up with a table indicating the levels of analysis and the 'equipment' or skills required for each level of interpretation.

I introduce this material here because iconology and even iconography as a method have rarely had any significant role in the interpretative methodology of photography theory. No doubt this is partly due to the highly specialized discourses of Renaissance art and baroque history that Panofsky was seen to be occupied with.⁵ Photography theory and its history have occasionally been based within a semiotic method, which emerged in 1960s Paris amid the radical excitement of structuralism and poststructuralism during the 1970s. Much of this work was synthesized in Anglo-American circles by various thinkers, mostly during the 1980s, then abandoned again in the 1990s and since.⁶ Most obviously, the early semiotic work of Roland Barthes, and his method of analysis of an advertising image in 'Rhetoric of the Image' was particularly influential, alongside many others, Régis Durand, Victor Burgin, Judith Williamson and many others.⁷ To my knowledge, no one has thought to compare these two traditions of iconology and semiotics, perhaps because they tend to engage different fields, iconology in art history and semiotics in the study of popular culture respectively. There may have been other specific objections to photography being introduced into art history methods linked to the problems of studying the Renaissance. Barthes's early semiotic analyses of photography, for example, were addressed to the new media and mass communications practices. Both iconology and semiotics have specific histories and objects of enquiry, which have framed them and justified the reasons for their development. A comparison between iconology and semiotics might thus draw out the similarities and differences between them. But what if the aim is to choose a contemporary photographic artwork for interpretation? Should an iconological method or semiotic theories be used? Which one would be best? Would the outcome be different as a result?

What do the two methods have in common with the *Da Vinci Code*? It is of interest that in the story Robert Langdon the expert iconologist is teamed up with another character, Sophie Neveu, a woman who turns out to be more than she seems. She is a specialist 'cryptographer' employee in the Department of Cryptography (of the DCPJ). Her 'feminine intuition' is used to complement the fastidious masculine thought of the 'super-art historian', so that together their combined minds can master the plot and stay ahead of the police and their idiotic deductions. Together they are able to find the *true* meaning of the da Vinci code. (This turns out to be Sophie herself as the final survivor of the 'royal bloodline'.) The significant point is that both feminine and masculine attributes are invoked as offering the best combination for the activity of deduction and interpretation. Each supports the other in producing the construction of meaning, preventing 'wild interpretations' that can lead their path astray. Such debates exist in art history too.

The art historian Margaret Iverson points out that some of those working in the tradition of Warburg's art historical method have often been less than faithful

to Warburg's own original and somewhat broad technique of interpretation. She makes the point that Warburg's own techniques employ characteristics sympathetic to feminist art historical practice. Warburg herself, she argues, developed a method that corresponds to feminist critiques in methods of interpretation, where the historian so often suffers from 'detachment':

His work suggests a sensibility which remembers proximity to the mother, that is the lack of differentiation between self and other; remembers the pain of separation.⁸

Iverson regards Erwin Panofsky, whose work is usually regarded as the successor to Warburg, as 'the very model of the detached scholar, cut off from his body and unconscious'.⁹ It is precisely this proximity to the 'body and unconscious' that lays the interpreter open to the processes of affect, and the experience of interpretation on the self.¹⁰ Yet as even Panofsky notes, a synthetic intuition 'may be better developed in a talented layman than in an erudite scholar'.¹¹ The Italian art historian, Carlo Ginzburg, independently agrees with this assessment in his own praise for Warburg's techniques:

Warburg's attention to the specific social and cultural context [that] preserved him from the interpretative excesses to which even so great a scholar as Panofsky (not to speak of some of his successors) occasionally succumbed.¹²

Ginzburg's method draws on Warburg's method of drawing on a wider context; as Peter Burke argues in the introduction to Ginzburg's work, he wants to replace 'iconographic laxity' with a more rigorous method.¹³ Following Salvatore Settis, he gives three basic rules for interpretation as follows:

- 1 All the pieces should fit together without leaving blank spaces.
- 2 The whole should make sense.
- 3 (Added by Ginzburg:) Other things being equal, the interpretation requiring the fewest hypotheses should generally be taken as the most probable.

So, we might pose the question: what do Sherlock Holmes, Sigmund Freud and Giovanni Morelli all have in common? What they all have in common, Peter Burke argues in his discussion of Carlo Ginzburg's work, is that they base their interpretations on seemingly trivial pieces of evidence: the 'barking of a dog' in Holmes, the 'slip of a tongue' in Freud, and the 'minor details' of paintings in Morelli's art historical analysis of paintings.¹⁴ Without wishing to collapse these methods and practices together as *the same*, it is noticeable their common ground is to elaborate a 'whole' interpretation of meaning that starts with details. These details, whether articulated within iconological or semiotic methods of analysis all involve the gathering of evidence for interpretation, resolved into a synthesis: as a meaning at least, if not the promise of the revelation of a riddle or enigma.

The following discussion of a photograph is set within the context of these methods of interpretation. The method thus highlights the spectator's role. The picture and its description are put in dialogue with the use of a spectator's knowledge to 'see where it leads'. As a theory of reading it draws on the iconographic tradition in art history and (poststructuralist) semiotics, alongside the theory of *semiosis* (the process of a slippage in meaning and signification), a sliding of one thought into another, as already familiar from the psychoanalytic theory of 'displacement'.¹⁵ Freud referred to the interpretation of dreams as the 'dream-work', a process of transforming the manifest content of a dream-image (like the puzzle or 'hieroglyph') into a discourse of latent thoughts for analysis.¹⁶ We might consider the day-dream reverie (or 'hallucination' as Barthes called this experience in *Camera Lucida*¹⁷) involved in the everyday activity of looking at photographs as a similar process, leading to the construction of meaning.¹⁸ In everyday life we tend to foreclose this process, at least in our conscious experience of it, by rapidly shifting our look and interest from one image to another. In a gallery or street billboards, we flip constantly from one scene to another, just as we do on a computer screen, a virtual spectacle whose potential for meanings is never quite consciously grasped. If this process, what Freud once called 'displacement', seems to resemble the activity of 'distraction' or drifting, it is nevertheless (like the Situationist 'theory of the derive' as proposed by Guy Debord¹⁹) because they are the constituent parts of a productive construction of a signifying chain, whose activity brings about a kind of topological network of meaning.

This 'image-work' (the activity of paying attention to the details of an image) in iconology and semiotics, is by analogy with Freud's concept of dream-work, the work of interpretation towards the analysis of meaning construction. By returning to a picture repeatedly, via its displacements (or to put this process into its rhetorical category, via *metonymy* and *metaphor*²⁰), the discursive figurations begin to make significant meaning visible through the equivalences between them, thus making apparent their role in the construction of meaning.

The aim here is making visible the relations that are intertwined in a picture, as can be revealed within language, despite what remains invisible inside a picture's discourse. This is not in any way to 'reduce' a photograph to 'writing', to spoken or written language (an old accusation levied by photography critics about semiotics, but curiously not by critics of iconology in art history), but to show the way that a literary text is also able to illuminate the invisible functions of the picture: to speak what it does not say. This 'image-work' method, which might be called an analysis, is perhaps more easily demonstrated than explained, in terms of the effect it has of transforming pictographic elements into discourse, and the image into discourse that is visible in language.

The picture I choose below by Jeff Wall is one that 'came to mind' not specifically because of any critical popularity of his tableau artworks in recent decades, but because this particular image had already been 'stuck in my mind'.²¹



FIGURE 4.2 Jeff Wall, *Milk*, 1984. 187 × 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

II Words

The title of Jeff Wall's picture points the spectator to a substance with which we are all familiar: *milk*. Milk is a primary food of life, the key sustenance for a baby and something that we all know about. Yet already, I have started along a chain of association, which is not, strictly speaking, part of the picture, but rather, part of what in 'classic semiotics' was called the 'connotations'.²²

First used by Roland Barthes in his early analyses of photographs, denotation and connotation form a fundamental opposition with which to understand how meanings in photographs are achieved. While the denotation refers to the so-called 'objectivity' of a picture, of 'what I can see', the connotations are the associations derived from those denotations brought to bear upon the image, which are dependent on the reader's existing knowledge (cultural knowledge, social, personal, political, ideological values, photographic codes, etc). For example, in terms of a discourse on the history of photography, the word 'milk' in conjunction with the liquid in the picture: I am immediately reminded of a famous photograph by Harold Edgerton of a milk splash made in 1936 (see Figure 4.3).

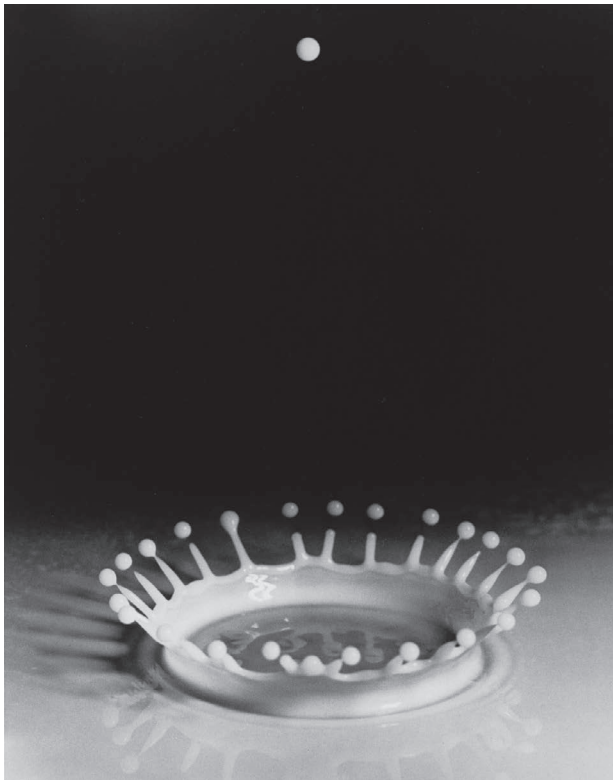


FIGURE 4.3 Harold E. Edgerton, *Milk Drop Coronet*, 1936. © Harold & Esther Edgerton Foundation, 2007, Courtesy of Palm Press, Inc.

It is a work of technical virtuosity as well as a delicate picture, amazing at the time because Edgerton had built a special flash, which functioned at one millionth of a second, fast enough to catch the splash of milk or even a bullet from a gun.

In this association with Edgerton's photography, my interest or even desire to look at the Jeff Wall picture appears to have veered off – in what Freud would have called a 'displacement', one of the key mechanisms of the dream-work. It is precisely along such paths of association, of metaphor/metonymy (one thing leading to another) that the daydream follows a trajectory defined by the desire of the spectator. Yet it should be noted that this first association of Wall's work in fact involves the product of its linguistic title *milk*, a word in the English language that anchors a meaning to the picture. The title plays a crucial role when it comes to the *polysemic* image.²³ Here the *potential* for any different definition of this liquid flowing in the picture is policed by the title word. 'Milk' pins a level of perception onto the image. This 'policing' function works against any cultural knowledge of a viewer that might take their thoughts away from the idea that this is anything other than milk being spilt in the picture. For example, I know, from personal knowledge of Canada (where I once briefly lived in the 1980s) and where this picture was made (Vancouver), that drinking alcohol in public was not allowed, is illegal. As a consequence, people who wish to drink alcohol on the street frequently 'disguise' the alcohol by concealing its container in a brown paper bag, which is itself a common form, so as to appear anonymous and invisible within North American culture. As in this picture I am tempted to 'read' the substance emerging from the brown bag in the picture as alcohol (why would you hide milk in a brown paper bag?²⁴), but for the title, which enforces *milk* as the correct and proper denotation of the liquid in the picture. The title or 'caption' thus functions to police such readings of the denotation of this picture, which is especially important in, for example, small reproductions of the picture, where the liquid might be read otherwise, as the foam of a (lager) beer.²⁵

Turning now to the image itself, what does it show? A man sits, squatting on a street and forms a triangular shape with his body. From art history I know that the triangular form is a classical device in Western painting, particularly in the tradition of the tableau, but it can be traced back at least to the fifteenth-century debates about composition. Leonardo da Vinci for example advocated using triangular groups of figures as a means to organize the argument of a picture. This was not so much due to the required connotations of the Christian trinity, but rather the denotational logic of a mathematical balance in composition.²⁶ The triangular form offers simplicity of structure, which aids an easy reading of the visual message of a picture. (This is perhaps most clearly seen in the paintings of Raphael who strived for a harmonious whole not only between characters, but within them too.) Within this harmony, as Leonardo da Vinci had argued, the good composition of figures would have 'some contrast of parts'.

In Jeff Wall's picture the neat harmony of a triangle, formed by the head, knee and shoe of the figure is broken, exceeded and rhetorically opposed by the liquid flailing across the visual space. This liquid is frozen in time, denoting 'spilled' and

introduces a dis-harmony into the mathematics of the pictorial composition – a Brechtian ‘social gest’. The milk ‘upsets’ the picture. The harmony of the scene shows a disjunctive moment, the duration of a disruption.

Behind and underneath the figure are flat surfaces, forming a series of rectangular constructions. From the rectangular shape of the humble brick, through to the wall behind the figure, the black space next to it, the left-hand column of bricks, the glassed space on the left and the white rectangle of space above it, the rectangular shape is multiplied across the picture. The only other element not to belong to this rectangular organization of the picture is the organic plant on the left and its shadow, which falls to the right. The plant’s shadow, like the head of the figure in the picture, points towards the right-hand side of the image. A diagonal shape on the left side of the picture, a banister seen through the glass window intimates the presence of a staircase, but otherwise it is rectangular shapes that make up the background of the picture. There are only two planes in this picture, the foreground figure and objects on the pavement, and the background, which is more-or-less flat except for the vertical abyss of dark black space between the bricks and ascending staircase. A series of contrasts then, three key different formal signifying chains: a triangle (the human figure), rectangles (background) and organic shapes, the plant and spilt milk, which incidentally mirror each other in their formal shapes. It is against this compositional schema, where the pavement’s background rectangles form the scene for the ‘action’ within the tableau, that the milk jerked across the frame, and its causality by the depicted figure, is given its meaning.

Why is this figure sitting on the pavement? I read the figure as a ‘homeless’ type, an assumption (perhaps even a prejudice) made from something in the clothing, the cut of the hair, and perhaps even his expression contributes to this meaning. (There could be alternative readings here, of course, such as ‘he is ill’.) Under magnification, as in Wall’s catalogue, it can be seen that his left shoe, nicely lit in the sunlight as though in a shoe advertisement, has no lace in it.

I read this lace-less shoe as a clear stereotyped code, whose (denotational) signified meaning is ‘un-tied’, as itself a figure of speech for (connotation of) being homeless: ‘untied’ = homeless.

But that this man is homeless and ‘un-tied’ is only the condition for the subject matter of the picture. What remains is the question of *why* this liquid is flailing across space. While it is obvious that the figure is in the process of ‘spilling’ the milk – we *see* this – the cause of this action remains unknown to us. Why has he spilt the milk? Can we read it in his face? Is it, for example, that he is angry at something, which he has expressed by making a sweeping gesture with his right hand, accidentally forgetting that he had milk in his hand and spilling the liquid as a result? Or is it that he is unable to control his limbs so that, in a spastic gesture, his arm is momentarily ‘uncontrollable’? The meaning of this scene oscillates between such interpretations and, in effect, disturbs any simple single signified being pinned on the picture. As a consequence, the viewer is returned to the title of the picture, *Milk*, and to look once again around the picture for any missed clues.

The lack of a sock attracts my eye. It reveals the colour of flesh that links tonally to his arm and sideways clenched fist. With this clenched fist, I think of Sergei Eisenstein and the discussion of the famous clenched fist film still shot from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), as discussed by Roland Barthes in his essay 'The Third Meaning'.²⁷ Barthes argues, the clenched fist – or indeed any gesture – has a social meaning:

given in full 'detail', [it] signifies indignation, anger mastered and channelled, the determination of the struggle; metonymically joined to the whole Potemkin story, it 'symbolizes' the working class in all its resolute strength for, by a miracle of semantic intelligence, this fist which is seen *wrong way up*, kept by its owner in a sort of clandestinity (it is the hand which *first of all* hangs naturally along the trouser leg and which *then* closes, hardens, *thinks* at once its future struggle, its patience and its prudence), cannot be read as the fist of some hoodlum, of some fascist: it is *immediately* a proletarian fist.²⁸



FIGURE 4.4 Clenched fist (film still) from Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*.

This is the 'social gest' a term that Barthes borrows from Brecht, to mean an image gesture 'in which a whole situation can be read'.²⁹ Hands are often used this way to signify something more in photographs, just as they are in life.³⁰

In Wall's picture, however, the gesture of 'anger' is neither repressed (held down) nor victorious (held up), but points in the direction of the spilled milk, and the bush to the left of the picture beyond it. The milk returns as central to the picture, as though it lactates over the image. *Milk*: Wall has given us with his title, the key to the picture. Let's follow the logic of a dream-analysis, and draw upon the associative paths added so far to construct an interpretation or, as it is put in iconology, into a 'synthesis'.

Firstly, the figure is 'outside' and does not appear to 'fit in' to the background, into the anonymous institution behind him, a building that is basically a 'brick

wall' in the picture. Reversing this relationship (a familiar occurrence in dreams where logics are often reversed due to dream-censorship), we might conjecture: this man *cannot* fit this institution. This building, part of which appears to be a bit plastic (the bricks on the left), leads to the message that the condition of homelessness is due to a mis-match between institutions and individuals, certain of whom, for a variety of social, psychological, economic or political conditions are unable to belong to them. Whichever way we look at it, there is a 'mis-fit' between an individual and an institution. In this respect, secondly, we also see a man throwing milk out of its container and the crumpled brown bag: he is in fact throwing away, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, a primary food, a source of nourishment. So, the picture might be interpreted like this: this man is throwing away milk, life itself. The context in which he is doing this 'on the street' is against the harsh institutional structure background behind him, a reading further connoted by the 'hard' light falling on the walls and the repetition of the rigidly rectangular shapes. This is not to claim, too simply, that this figure is somehow a 'victim' of the institution behind him, a stereotype that would have a homeless person as a passive individual, dismissed as a social casualty, but rather, as he is represented here: as an active and angry person, who is nevertheless 'wasting life' and 'outside' an institution.

III

This (now) explicit connoted meaning, which might seem ridiculous if it was imposed without recognizing the part that the formal and figurative elements play in the picture and its construction, can still easily be dismissed by referring back to the denotation of the photograph. And this, as Barthes had argued in his classic semiotics, *is* the paradox of the photographic image, as a particular type of sign that has appeared to be 'neutral' and 'objective' in what he had called its 'analogic plenitude'.³¹ But Wall's photograph works against this deceit. In the common stereotype of the visible homeless (and my experience), those who exhibit their possessions to passers-by on well-trodden pavements of metropolitan cities, the chosen drink is not usually 'milk'. Indeed, we see here again the importance of the title of *Milk*. My presumption about the picture from the first time I saw it is that this froth is from beer, not milk. The stubbornness of that message (in my mind) comes from the repeated stereotyped image of a homeless person with alcohol, endlessly circulated in media messages, dramas and movies, a stock-in-trade motif of which many cultures are filled: that people 'on the street' drink alcohol. The picture catches me out. Wall's 'milk' in this scene enables the image to *disturb* this social stereotype, to go against the grain. The substance of milk is thus crucial to the work. The substitution of one thing for another (liquids) is again a standard activity in the dream-work process and, because it is milk, goes along a chain of associations that leads to, not to some original meaning, but an original primary experience of milk, and the figure of which milk is a displacement: the mother's body. In human culture all milk, from whatever animal, is a substitute for that original food, upon which infants depend, the milk provided by the mother's body. Indeed, the

experience of every baby of suckling milk is not only nourishment, whatever its source, but also the infant's first site (the mouth) for the organization of pleasure.³²

In a field of semiotic-psychoanalytic theory, one might read in this man's gesture an expulsion, a rejection of milk, and in so doing construct what Julia Kristeva calls in her book *Powers of Horror* an archaic 'mother-phobia'.³³ Men's (and indeed, women's) relation to their mother, as son (or daughter), is that she is the woman they could not have. This idea and the opposing dread of it are outlined in the famous and fundamental 'incest taboo' that anthropologists (e.g. Claude Lévi-Strauss) argue is a universal social law, the defining basis of human culture that separates it from other animals in exogamy, the exchange of women.³⁴ Even without this, Kristeva argues that milk is a key form of abjection, especially in that 'skin' of milk, which forms on the top of milk after heating, and which can create a gagging sensation in the throat of some: a phobia against those things which are 'not me', but 'not nothing either'.³⁵ Abjection is what lies on the very boundary of our identities. This is the boundary position of the milk in Wall's picture; the milk is 'barred', but nevertheless still there. The expelling gesture of this lactating fluid by the figure figures as the angry rejection of the *maternal*. Located at the boundary of masculinity, the milk of human kindness is expelled, as the terror of a metonymical 'mother-image'. Or it may be argued, such 'ejection' of white fluid can relate as metaphor to that other fluid of life, the ejaculation of sperm.³⁶ (A spectacular display of 'potent' virile fantasy that conceals the anxiety of castration.) Either way, it is what is here 'wasted'. Let us return to the theme of milk, as contained by the title of the photograph.

It is interesting here, and perhaps significant too, to consider the way that representations of milk and the woman's body are used to signify a cultural function, since we can find representations that relate to this dynamic between milk and the woman's body as social image, even in culturally displaced forms. Two examples: one from advertising and the other from a critical photographic practice of the 1980s (contemporary to Jeff Wall's *Milk* picture).

In the advertising campaign image for women's underwear, the billboard image shows a young female model holding two glass bottles of milk.³⁷ She appears to be emerging from a doorway, and we can imagine the scene: she has popped outside to collect these two pints of milk from her doorstep. Her facial expression and smile might suggest she has recognized someone else in the street as she is looking towards her left (our right) out of frame. This 'innocuous' scene of a woman outside in her underwear for an everyday event 'collecting milk' suggests, on the one hand, the simple obvious dual function: a display of her body (the ideal bequeathed by the underwear clothing), and that this brand of underwear is so attractive that you can appear in it out in public. No doubt intended as a 'positive image' for diversity, the visual parallel between the milk and the underwear is nevertheless 'whiteness', a signification that gains traction through the stark white colour against the darker skin colour of the model.³⁸ Whiteness here signifies 'purity', as in the substance of milk and presumably the woman, whose 'innocence' is also implied as a signification because she is appearing outside her front door in her underwear.

The general tone of the picture embodying a kind of innocence and purity relates also to a particular moment in the cultural and media narrative of Woman's life, here the specific moment of a feminine ideal: young, beautiful and innocent. This is not yet the body of a mother. Milk signifies here as a plenitude to come, milk as signifier of (potential) motherhood and maternity. Two pints of milk we see in her hands appear alongside an expectant look, so that both the milk and her underwear signify as components in a latent sexual narrative of woman's life. This is not to say her future belongs to reproduction, which is 'non-essential', as Julia Kristeva puts it in 'Woman's Time', but that it is part of a social narrative about women's time.³⁹

Such representations of a 'future perfect' mother' is bleakly satirized in Jo Spence's staging of herself, posed as the stereotype of a working-class mother and 'wife', the 'no-longer-desired' domestic worker Mother-Woman. Spence's image is curiously also staged as a doorstep scene, a brilliant parody of a British 1930s documentary image of a 'good housewife', a worn sweeping brush in hand. Milk figures again, now sited on the doorstep and the Cinderella-like figure appears naked except for a modesty towel, glasses, watch, bracelets and necklace, as though these adornments are all still important, as what partially remains and sustains her during the drudgery of a pre-emancipated woman relegated to relentless domestic



FIGURE 4.5 Marks & Spencer department store advertisement campaign, 2007. M&S billboard, London, 2008. Photograph by the author.



FIGURE 4.6 Jo Spence, 'Colonization', from the *Remodelling Photo History* series, 1982.

work. The woman's body and milk are used to lean in a very different way on the question of the function and role of a woman in society and her image as desirable object in representations across 'everyday life'. These implied relations to the role of milk and a mother-figure, as the primary carer of the child, point to questions about the social cultural function of gender distinction.

If all this milk and mother talk seems like a distraction it is nevertheless to make a contrast: Jeff Wall's picture seems to speak about a masculine relation to milk. Why is this relevant?

It is a cliché of conservative politics to speak of 'the state' negatively. The state, they say, is an infringement on the rights of the individual. They call it a 'nanny state', which is not simply the image of an *au pair* girl, a young woman or even any general 'femininity', but rather, the particular qualities of a matronly motherly figure, who 'suffocates' the child and oppresses a supposed 'liberty'. The life spirit is 'contained'. In this sense, the image of the man rejecting this metonymical mother can be folded back into the brick wall that stands behind him to say: this image signifies his rejection of the institution behind him, the 'nanny state' that is supposed to look after him. Milk, as food of life or even as seed, stands for the pre-symbolic drives (life-force) that fall outside or beyond social constraints. Behind this male figure is, quite literally, the institution, the building and architecture of culture. In front of the figure is the liquid, the pre-symbolic 'stuff' that remains, literally, 'uncontained'. It is perhaps even uncontainable. Above all, perhaps, the picture shows the conflict alive in all masculinity (highlighted by Freud and Kristeva) between the authority of the social (patriarchal) institution and the semiotic drives (Kristeva's concept of inner drives) which are not satisfied by them.

The signifying components of the picture have simultaneously several contiguous (parallel) messages that all 'speak at once', a pattern that Roland Barthes had already identified at work in his 'rhetoric of the image' analysis of a Panzani pasta advertisement.⁴⁰ Similarly here, firstly, a *linguistic* message (1) 'milk' is anchored to what is already seen in the picture as clue to the key of the picture. Then the (2) visual iconic *denoted* message of 'a homeless man on a (city) street in an agitated mood' is overlain by the (3) *connoted* symbolic message, which is parasitic, dependent on the first two messages. This third message is about the relation to institutions: the mother (milk) and the state (the building), condensed together, condensed milk. In an ordinary reading of the picture all this comes at once, it is, as Barthes says, simultaneous and instantaneous. The jumble of these messages all at once is what Barthes calls the paradox of the photographic image, the relation between its denoted and connoted meanings. It is what makes an immediate 'visual' reading of the picture sometimes difficult to translate or verbalize in words quickly, and demands, in the field of photographic theory, a method for its explanation. The semiotic theory of Barthes offered the virtue of understanding photographs as a rhetorical system, with codes as fixed *and* as mutable as the Highway Code. They nevertheless demand an act of translation. Psychoanalysis has also played a role here, to understand what is at work in the processes of viewing and spectatorship. It is the work and responsibility of photography theory to understand the operation of

such codes; the social and psychical *mechanisms* where the semiotic meanings and messages of what Barthes described as the rhetoric of the photographic image are formulated.

So, I can now see why Harold Edgerton's photograph of a splash of milk always 'comes to mind' when I look at this picture. In common with Jeff Wall's picture, it is a 'decisive moment' defined by milk. Milk as a fluid plays a central part in the meanings of both photographs.⁴¹ There is a technological factor here. The speed of the flash in Edgerton's picture is also used to freeze the milk drop in mid-air. With the Edgerton picture, the motive of the 'scientific' photograph is known: the splash of milk is the effect of it being dripped as a scientific experiment, the consequence of a drop of milk falling in space. The picture settles a dispute, started earlier, about what things look like beyond human vision, especially movement, within the blink of the human eye. In Edgerton's pictures we see the 'optical unconscious' that Walter Benjamin had once remarked made photography such a remarkable practice, that is, the capacity *to see* beyond what the eye can see. The spectator can marvel and be amazed at the sight of this milk splash and the form that it has created. And what has been revealed in this potential of an optical unconscious? A form in nature which itself imitates the crown worn by royalty. The crown of milk elevates this humble substance to the realm of kings and queens, and we find the dignity of milk ridiculed by the single falling drop (at the top) and raised again by the elevating 'crown'.

In Wall's picture the motive and causality are less clear. We do not know the motive of the character, nor the causality, *why* the milk is spilling across the picture. But Edgerton's picture gives a clue; the value of milk in Wall's picture is what is in question. The *punctum temporis* of the picture asks the viewer: 'how can he do that? Why is he doing it, why waste it?' These are the questions that disturb the possibility of any final signified or any simple 'closure' to the picture. (We might even argue that this non-closure of meaning is what makes it an art photograph, as distinct from advertising or editorial and news photography, where there are distinct final meanings attributed or at least *intended*.) The meanings circulate between what the photograph shows, the denotations (what I see), and how it shows them, the connotations (what I think it means).

Thus far, the perhaps inevitable question on the part of a reader might emerge: is all this meaning construction and 'interpretation' the sort of thing that Jeff Wall as author of the picture *intended*? Surely not, some might exclaim. But how would we know? What if this was not the intended meaning? Does it render the reading here suddenly 'invalid'? Is an author anyway the master of their own mind and their own intentions?

IV Authorship

There are two famous essays that deal with the role of authorship in the production of meaning, one by Roland Barthes and the other by Michel Foucault. In 'Death of the Author' Roland Barthes argues that if the critic has the work why

do they need the author to stand 'behind it'? Should the work as image not stand by itself? But, and this is Barthes's argument, should the critic or reader of a work not be at liberty to make their own sense of it, without fixing the meaning back to the author's real or imagined 'intention', what would be an authorial closure of meaning. Barthes is against closure: a work is to be '*disentangled*', not '*deciphered*'.⁴² It should be opened up and not closed down according to the meaning laid down by some 'author-God', as Barthes puts it. I would thus be justified to say, if I chose to follow the argument of Barthes, that 'Jeff Wall' as the author of the image is irrelevant now for how and what meaning I construct from this picture.

Michel Foucault's argument in his essay 'What is an Author?' is slightly different, situated at the level of a discourse analysis.⁴³ A discourse is a complex of elements whose relations add up, even in their contradictions, to the constitution of objects and the objectivity of a thing, like 'art' or 'photography'.⁴⁴ Foucault notes that not all discourses need an author, that the concept of an author, what he calls an 'author-function', is the product and feature of particular types of discourse. In advertising, for instance, the author of written copy is usually anonymous, but assumed to be that of the brand itself, as much as any of its images are too. The discourse of art, that is, the totality of museums, galleries, critics, art magazines, sales rooms, etc., certainly requires not only artists but also authors in its discourse, without which it cannot function. From this perspective we might then well ask what an author thinks their work does, and add what they say to the discursive field of information about the artwork. Of course, in one respect this is exactly what Barthes was complaining about, the way that what an author says comes to take over the discourse, is taken to signify *the* truth of a work, whereas they may, however, only know or choose a partial meaning. (They are, after all, also operating within the discourse too.) As it happens, Jeff Wall is an artist who does insist on contributing to the discourse on his work and refuses the habitual division of labour in art between art critics 'who speak' and artists who silently make work.

In fact, Jeff Wall has written on *Milk* and here is what he says in an interview about his working method:

When I'm making a picture, I spend a lot of time in my car driving around the city, 'location scouting'. I'm usually looking for a certain combination of elements, a kind of street, certain architectural typologies and so on. Naturally I always search with something specific in mind. But this idea, which is usually the early concept of the picture, is quite abstract and indistinct. ... For example, in *Milk* I had thought of the figure against a blank wall. But the actual site is far more differentiated, and the gap between the buildings has for me an effect similar to the unexpected openings in the perspective of mannerist paintings.⁴⁵

We can take the term 'mannerist', a traditional reference to the Italian art of the 1600s, as meaning something 'unresolved', in the way that Michelangelo or Benvenuto Cellini made it difficult for decoration or visual harmony to be achieved as a

harmonious ‘whole’. This unresolved aspect relates to the form and content of the image. Later in the same interview Wall remarks, ‘I’m aware that my pictures have a feeling of unfreedom about them. Their subject matter is unfreedom too.’⁴⁶ Elsewhere, in an essay called ‘Photography and Liquid Intelligence’ written in 1989, Wall starts out by remarking:

In *Milk*, as in some of my other pictures, an important part is played by complicated natural forms. The explosion of the milk from its container takes a shape, which can’t easily be described or characterized, but which provokes many associations. A natural form, with its unpredictable contours, is an expression of infinitesimal metamorphoses of quality. Photography seems perfectly adapted for representing this kind of movement or form. I think this is because the mechanical character of the action of opening and closing the shutter – the substratum of instantaneity, which persists in all photography – is the concrete opposite kind of movement from, for example, the flow of a liquid.⁴⁷

Milk, normally the flow of a liquid, is here ‘arrested’ into a shape and form, Wall argues, which can have many other meanings. Although he seems unwilling to say what these meanings might be, he suggests they are (as ‘natural forms’) ‘compelling’ when seen in a photograph ‘because the relations between them and the whole construct, the whole apparatus and institution of photography, is of course emblematic of the technological and ecological dilemma in relation to nature’.⁴⁸ Wall points us towards the issue of natural forms in nature. The milk, on the right of the picture and the plant on the left of it, do indeed work together in some symbiotic dialogue as natural forms. Indeed, the plant and milk mirror one another’s shapes in the photograph. Wall explicitly links the appearance of these natural forms to the meaning of the photograph, yet tends to see them as some kind of technological metaphor or symbol for the whole eco-technological question of photography. Wasting milk can be linked to wasting nature, the bush on the left? Such readings are also possible.

Yet Wall also tends to mythologize the camera shutter here.⁴⁹ The ‘freezing’ of the shutter, the instant that stops this milk in mid-flight is no mere casual snapshot on a street, it is the determined work of a sophisticated technician. Flash lighting, from the left-hand off-frame space (masquerading as daylight), is required to stop the milk in its flight. (Harold Edgerton used a special high-speed flash for his milk picture.) This is a highly constructed image. Wall concludes his short essay with an enigma in his remark, ‘In photography, the liquids study us, even from a great distance.’⁵⁰ What if this liquid is not milk?

V Allegory

On showing this image to an advertising photographer who works with food, he said instantly: ‘The liquid is not milk; milk does not have that kind of viscosity

that you see here in the picture. It would not look like that', he claimed. After taming my surprise, I asked 'What do you think it was?' He suggested it might be some kind of paint or liquid latex or a mixture of both. What if, even the very denotations of the picture are framed by a fiction? Would this make any difference to the meaning of the picture? What if the construction of the key element of the scene is the effect of a construction, a trick-of-the-trade? It should be made clear here that this issue is less about the 'reality' of the referent (as if Jeff Wall should be asked for the 'true' meaning) than it is the effect of the idea of the referent. That is to say, *what if* this substance was not milk, but paint, what effect would it have on the meaning of the picture? Instead of turning to the negative of the *realist dialectic* between truth and falsity, what if we follow the logic of signification, where substitution is normal in the process of meanings and signification? (To ask the author – a spurious route, given that Wall has said that it is milk in the interview.) If we disregard the question of whether it really is milk or not and instead consider the effect of the substitution of paint on the meaning of the image, what happens? What is the effect this mode of thinking? Let's say, the use of another substance, not revealed in Wall's commentaries or interviews, does *not* destroy the meaning of the picture, it merely propels it into another domain of reading, one that might be called allegorical. Allegory is the expression of one idea behind another, that is, where everything in the image is already a metaphor, a substitution of one thing for the culturally associated meaning of another.

This may not be the place for an extensive discussion of allegory, given its long history within the history of pictorial art and literature, but, ironically, as in the use of allegory in postmodern art, it might well lead us to another type of 'truth'. The use of allegory in postmodernism was outlined in 1980 by the art critic Craig Owens in his essay 'The Allegorical Impulse'.⁵¹ Owens links the re-emergence of allegory to the combination of significant rhetorical forms, for example a: 'projection of metaphor as metonymy is one of the fundamental strategies of allegory'.⁵² 'Milk', a metonymy (a part stands for the whole) of the whole body that produces it. Paint gains its allegorical meaning from its associative orbit, the work of art; Wall is 'painting' a picture and slides into the discourse of art. The substance becomes rhetorical; with the milk signifying as 'paint', its significance in the picture becomes different. Now the tragic unrest of this figure in the picture, whose face is taut with tension as he hurls his liquid discontent out of its container, suddenly becomes the action of a painter. Action painter. As a painter, as an artist, another perhaps more repressed reading can come to the foreground. The picture might be *seen* as an allegory of art itself. What is this situation?

It has already been noted that Wall's picture sets up its figure within the classical tradition of tableau painting, a fact that Wall explicitly acknowledges about the whole of his work. Witness his 1984 essay 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet' (written the same year that *Milk* is made) where he considers that Édouard Manet 'had divided feelings about the tendency towards the disintegration of the classical unity of the "concept of the picture" which art history assumes he could perceive in his own work'.⁵³

Manet is a pivotal nineteenth-century painter, a figure most often seen as translating the pictorial traditions of classical tableau painting into modern art in both its subject matter and its form of painting. How does this relate to Wall's photograph? In *Milk*, the triangular geometry of the figure is set against a modern institutional background, with its rectilinear construction. It is in front of this series of rectangles that the character's action of throwing the liquid remains undetermined, incomprehensible even.

Read in terms of painting and art history, of which Jeff Wall is clearly fond, the figure, classically triangular, is located between a foreground and background of two well-known types of modern painting. The flailing milk now becomes the involuntary 'gesture' of the abstract expressionist, as in the famous action paintings of Jackson Pollock. The link with Pollock, as the quintessential American abstract artist, is the flailing 'paint'. Jackson Pollock had hurled paint across his canvases, flicked and dripped it to evoke, what exactly?

Pollock had been inspired by the vast murals of Mexican artists, but as he told it, in the first such (abstract) painting, it was based on a childhood memory of a trip to the Grand Canyon, where he had seen the vision of a stampede of horses running wild across the land. He then 'painted hordes of animals charging across the canvas. But then, not wanting to reveal this childhood image, in a continued frenzy, obliterated them all again with swirling lines, finally filling in the spaces between with broad spattering brushstrokes'.⁵⁴ Thus the 'abstraction' Pollock heaped up, the splattering of paint across the canvas, was there to cover over the intensely personal material from view, leaving it as a 'screen memory', as private and invisible 'repressed' material. We are left with the enigmatic abstractions of such a process.



FIGURE 4.7 Jackson Pollock painting, 1997.

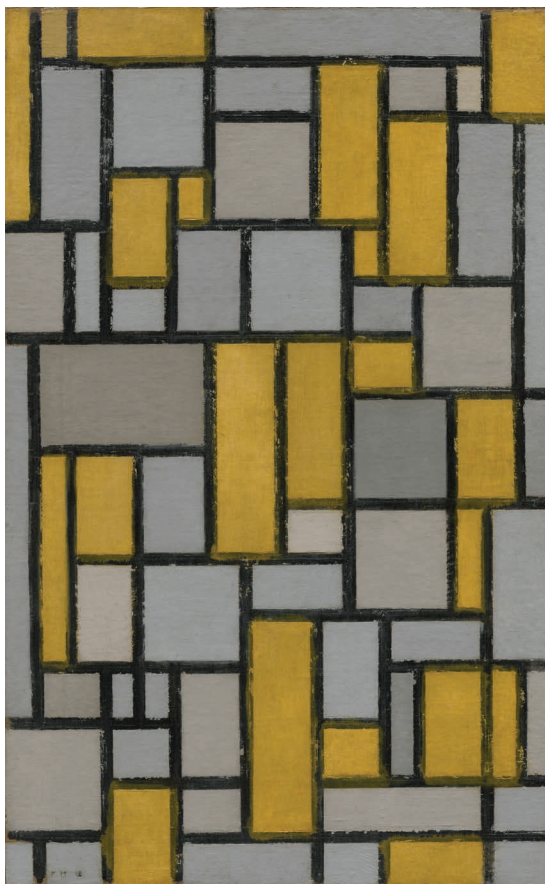


FIGURE 4.8 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Grid, no 1*, 1918. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Behind the ‘action’ of the figure in *Milk* is the literal background of Jeff Wall’s photograph, which relates to another direction, another famous abstract modern artist, the equally abstract work of Piet Mondrian, the (Dutch) artist of the ‘De Stijl’ (the Style) movement. The geometrical precision of Piet Mondrian’s so-called ‘Neo-plastic’ compositions aimed to develop at the beginning of the twentieth century a ‘universal’ language beyond the pictorial mimesis of Western art and its language of ‘representation’. In this iconoclasm, Mondrian, even in his older less famous type of painting, tried to eliminate any ‘particular’ features in his ‘pictures’ because their perception would hinder the apprehension of his aim for a ‘universal’ image. This is precisely the critique made of institutions: their bureaucratic anonymity, their lack of recognition of the particular and individuality and indeed of the imposition of general universal rules as an (often inadvertent) form of deprivation of pleasure. It is not that Mondrian set out to produce an allegory of bureaucracy or a critique of institutions, rather that the popular distaste for his

works – which are universally unpopular – has somehow recognized the kind of abstraction in thinking that appeals to bureaucrats.⁵⁵ Mondrian's endless dissatisfaction with his own craft, the dwindling use of colour and an increase of the overall grid demonstrated his craving for mastery over a form of organization: composition. Mondrian believed that there were certain fundamental laws hidden from view, which strangely mirrors the method of production of Jackson Pollock (with his hidden childhood imagery).

On one side, the 'irrationalism' of abstract expressionism and, on the other, the rationalism of 'mathematical' geometric modernism: abstract expressionism versus geometrical modernism. Both tendencies are forms of abstraction and tended towards mysticism, even though they are both still 'saying something'. It might then perhaps be possible to say that the allegorical anger felt by this figure in Wall's picture, who is not just an anonymous person now, but (in my allegorical reading) a 'homeless' *artist* outside the mainstream institution and, in some way, caught between these two forms of art practice. Anger is expressed and gestured at of an artist who is not at home in those modes of thought. It would thus be tempting to make a biographical reading to say that Jeff Wall *is* this figure, who in 1984 found himself 'outside' of the mainstream traditions of art around him, as he quite explicitly says in an interview at the time:

In my earlier pictures I was trying to be a little more dogmatic, trying to establish my position. ... This was in 1978, at the beginning of the new painting. It was a new subjectivistic period, and I was in certain ways trying to hold out against it, trying to continue an idea of historically and theoretically informed production, an idea which was, at that time at least, being identified with a failed cultural politics – that of the 60s and 70s – a defunct, nostalgic avant-gardism.⁵⁶

Wall positions himself as an artist, outside and against subjectivist painting. One might say the figure in the picture represents anger at this art and its institutional discourses, using the very means of that art, an abstract expressionist gesture (the milk – paint) on one side and the rigid purity of 'universalist' compositions on the other as the abdication of their responsibility towards art as a *social* practice. Jeff Wall again:

The classically accepted concept of the avant-garde as a form of culture which centred itself in a contestation over the social value of art is one which I accept. ... You can analyze the roots of this contestation, or struggle, in culture in any number of ways, but all of them, in my opinion, remain rooted in class conflict. ... The mystery of value is the fundamental mythic content of modernity.⁵⁷

The mystery of milk is the fundamental mythic content of Wall's picture. Here we reach the knot of Wall's picture: class conflict and its representation are what

matter. Thus, to contradict the popular expression, there *is* a point in crying over spilt milk. In fact, in this way, it is the spilt milk that studies us.

In the end, the enigma of images is not in their details, but in the accumulation of them as signifying components linked to a puzzle organized and informed by the spectator's knowledge. Unlike the detective, there is no final report, no closure around a hidden meaning discovered. If photography theory and history can learn anything from art history, it is this lesson, that the productivity of the image is rooted in its specific temporal dynamic with the viewer, in the enchantment of their mutual imaginary time and space.

Notes

- 1 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi Press, 2004). It would be tedious to have to justify the fact that Dan Brown's novels, starting with the *Da Vinci Code*, are very popular. Perhaps suffice to say that I bought my copy of the *Da Vinci Code* in a cheap UK supermarket, not renowned for their literature section.
- 2 Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 298.
- 3 See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), 31, 38.
- 4 Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 38.
- 5 See, for example, Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style* (London: MIT Press, 1995).
- 6 In the UK the key references here would be Victor Burgin, ed. *Thinking Photography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982) and John Tagg, who additionally used Foucault and Marx in *The Burden of Representation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988). In the USA, Abigail Solomon-Godeau was probably the most effective in bringing these theories to bear on contemporary photography debates of the time. See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- 7 See the early 1960s issues of the French journal *Communications* (nos 1–4) where Durand's and Barthes's essays were first published; Victor Burgin, 'Art, Commonsense and Photography' (1976), *The Camera Work Reader*, ed. J. Evans (London: Rivers Oran, 1997); Judith Williamson, *De-Coding Advertisements* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978).
- 8 Margaret Iverson, 'Retrieving Warburg's Tradition', *Art History*, Vol 16, no 4, December 1993, 545.
- 9 See Iverson, 'Retrieving Warburg's Tradition', 545.
- 10 Griselda Pollock has developed this aspect; see, for instance, her book *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 11 Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 38.
- 12 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Enigma of Piero*, translated by Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London: Verso, 2000), xxvii.
- 13 Ginzburg, *The Enigma of Piero*, xxvi.
- 14 Ginzburg, *The Enigma of Piero*, xxvi.
- 15 See 'Condensation' and 'Displacement' in Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 1988); and Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Vol 4, Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).
- 16 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.
- 17 For a nice gloss on this idea, see Victor Burgin, 'Barthes' Discretion' in *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 29–43.
- 18 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.
- 19 Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', in *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: ACTAR, 1996).

- 20 Jacques Lacan drew a parallel between Freud's terms of condensation and displacement and the rhetorical terms of metaphor and metonymy. See for instance: Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses* (London: Routledge, 1993), 221.
- 21 There is extensive art literature on the work of Jeff Wall. A good place to start would be *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné 1978–2004*, ed. Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005).
- 22 See Roland Barthes, *The Elements of Semiology* (Hill & Wang, 1980).
- 23 Roland Barthes discusses the role and relation of captions or titles to a picture in 'Rhetoric of the Image' and 'The Third Meaning'. See Roland Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1979).
- 24 I am aware that milk can have other implied meanings, for example in drug culture. If the substance in the picture was 'Milk Plus', the question would be more or less the same: why is the liquid 'milk'?
- 25 Interestingly, perhaps to avoid this mistaken identity, in an early Jeff Wall catalogue from 1986, the milk is shown hugely enlarged on a separate double-page spread, following the reproduction of the full image. See Jeff Wall, *Transparencies* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1986).
- 26 Despite the harmony required of figures and the relations between them Leonardo da Vinci argued that the good composition of a figure would have 'some contrast of parts'. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Treatise on Painting* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 32.
- 27 Roland Barthes writes about this fist as part of the 'obvious' meaning in Eisenstein's film image (from *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925). This meaning in Eisenstein's film is always, he says, 'revolution'. Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', *Image–Music–Text*, 56.
- 28 See Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', *Image–Music–Text*, 55–56.
- 29 Barthes discusses the 'social gest' in his essay 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', published in the same volume as 'The Third Meaning', *Image–Music–Text*, 76–77.
- 30 See Darian Leader, *Hands: What We Do with Them and Why* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016).
- 31 Some would say that this had changed little today, to transform the phrase into 'digital plenitude'.
- 32 I refer to the work developed in Freudian theory, see Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality' in *Unconscious Phantasy*, ed. Riccardo Steiner (London: Karnac Books, 2003).
- 33 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 56.
- 34 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (London: Spottiswoode, 1969). See also Elizabeth Cowie's commentary and argument around this for systems of representation in 'Woman as Sign' in *The Woman in Question*, ed. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (London: Verso, 1990).
- 35 Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 56.
- 36 I am aware that it may also be argued there is another, far more vulgar reading to such 'ejection' of fluid, which relates to the ejaculation of sperm. As his fist points to the 'bush' on the other side of the picture, a more explicit *genital* scene may be constructed, a display of male anxiety about sexuality as an event. (Although of course, as Freud once said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.)
- 37 It was once a familiar sight to see milk delivered in bottles to a home every day across the UK, even in high-rise apartment blocks. Today the practice is fading. So it may be argued that the image presented here also relates perhaps to the nostalgia for a period disappearing from view, and, in this sense, a 'past innocence' on the part of the 'older' female viewer to whom this advertising campaign was partly addressed. Nostalgia for youth is a common motif in advertising. On the other hand there is also a certain visual elegance of a *bottle* of milk over a packaged carton, at once denoting something more natural (as a glass container) and referring to a tradition too.
- 38 The model is Noémie Lenoir, the French mixed-race model and actor.

- 39 See Julia Kristeva, 'Woman's Time', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 189.
- 40 See Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', *Image-Music-Text*.
- 41 There are many other pictures, scenes and themes in art, photography and cinema, where milk is a key or significant element in the picture. Kenneth Hayes devotes an entire book to milk, however without the slightest reference to the source or function of milk. See Kenneth Hayes, *Milk and Melancholy* (Toronto: Prefix Press, 2006).
- 42 Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', *Image-Music-Text*, 147
- 43 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* (London: Penguin, 2000).
- 44 I take this definition of discourse from Ernesto Laclau's discussion of the term in Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 68.
- 45 Jeff Wall interviewed by Els Barents in Jeff Wall, *Transparencies* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1986), 97.
- 46 Jeff Wall interviewed by Els Barents in Wall, *Transparencies*, 101.
- 47 Jeff Wall, 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence' (1989) in *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon, 2009), 218.
- 48 Wall, 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence' in *Jeff Wall*, 218.
- 49 Technically, we should note that the camera shutter defines the temporal form of the image, but only as much as do the aperture, the perspectival geometry of the lens, the position of the camera, and the substrate analogue or digital materials that register the light projected onto them also determine its time/space signification. The privilege accorded to the shutter over the lens and other aspects of the camera apparatus suggests the famous (if disputed translation of the) photographic motto from Henri Cartier-Bresson: the 'decisive moment' is relevant here. In Wall's *tableau* scene, this 'instant' that is referred to is the milk (not the plant that is static) in action, which has been activated by the gesture of the figure holding it. This idea of the 'decisive moment', so beloved in photojournalism and reportage photography is taken up in the next chapter within the historical conception and framework of the 'staged' *tableau*.
- 50 Wall in *Jeff Wall*, 218.
- 51 Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism', *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).
- 52 Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse', 230, 232.
- 53 Jeff Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet', in *Jeff Wall*, 210.
- 54 See Peter Wollen, 'The Triumph of American Painting', *Raiding the Icebox* (London: Verso, 1993), 97–98.
- 55 A web-based project in 1995 by the dissident Russian artists Komar & Melamid used a marketing company to establish the most and least wanted painting image in different countries. The least wanted popular images were versions of abstract paintings and many that resembled Mondrian's. See the link: <https://awp.diaart.org/km/index.html>
- 56 Jeff Wall, interviewed by Els Barents in Wall, *Transparencies*, 97.
- 57 Jeff Wall interviewed by Els Barents in Wall, *Transparencies*, 103.



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FIGURE 5.1 Alfred Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, 1907.

5

ALFRED STIEGLITZ AND THE MIGRATION OF MEANING

There are many ways to speak about Alfred Stieglitz and what follows is only one of them. Much of the critical literature on Stieglitz as a major pioneer of art photography has aimed at either repeating his mythical reputation as seer and genius of photography or disputing it.¹ I want to make a different argument, neither to rehabilitate nor denigrate Stieglitz's role in the history of art photography, but to consider why one particular photograph is such a fulcrum point and focus in the history of photography.

I

Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph known as *The Steerage* (1907) stands as a classic picture in the history of photography and photographic criticism. The account given in the history of photography is more-or-less the same one repeated everywhere, established as a foundational image for photographic modernism. The story around it relates Stieglitz's heroic struggle to achieve a status for photography as a modern art, based in the 'New World' metropolis of New York city at the beginning of the twentieth century.² Stieglitz is the pioneer, the father patriarch figure of modernist art photography in the USA.³ The circles of men and women whom he gathered around him, artists, writers, poets and critics were all crucial too, forging and hammering out the visual arts as American – New York – culture. Through his gallery 291 (Fifth Avenue, New York) and subsequent ventures, he imported the radical new avant-garde European art from Paris and beyond, and was instrumental in establishing the parameters and basis for 'American' fine art photography.⁴ *The Steerage* was Stieglitz's own favourite photograph, such that he later claimed: 'If all of my photographs were lost and I'd be represented by just one, *The Steerage*, I'd be satisfied.'⁵ I will take him at his word and consider this one photograph.

An account of *The Steerage* in photographic criticism that comes from a different axis is one that examines the terms of its aspirations to photography as 'art'. It is Allan Sekula who takes up this criticism, using Stieglitz's own description of *The Steerage* as a basis for a critique of 'the relationship between photography and high art'.⁶ Sekula's text is itself an influential one, first published in *Artforum* in 1975 and later in key books on photography theory and criticism in the 1980s and referred to by dozens of others.⁷ Stieglitz's own account of the photograph is well known, a piece of writing cited by almost everyone in discussion of his picture. I will not deviate from this either, since the essay is crucial for the subsequent discussion. It is worth quoting from at length because it gives his version of 'How *The Steerage* Happened'. Stieglitz recounts:

Early in June 1907, my small family and I sailed for Europe. My wife insisted upon going on the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* – the fashionable ship of the North German Lloyd at the time. Our first destination was Paris. How I hated the atmosphere of the first class on that ship. One couldn't escape the *nouveaux riches*.

...

On the third day out I finally couldn't stand it any longer. I tried to get away from that company. I went as far forward on deck as I could. ... As I came to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage.

...

On the upper deck, looking over the railings there was a young man with a straw hat. The shape of the hat was round. He was watching the men and women and children on the lower steerage deck. Only men were on the upper deck. The whole scene fascinated me. I longed to escape from my surroundings and join those people.

...

A round straw hat, the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right, the white draw-bridge with its railings made of circular chains – white suspenders crossing on the back of a man in the steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape. I stood spellbound for a while, looking and looking. Could I photograph what I felt, looking and looking, and still looking. I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life. And as I was deciding, should I try to put down this seemingly new vision that held me – the common people, the feeling of a ship and ocean and sky and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich – Rembrandt came into my mind and I wondered would he have felt as I was feeling.⁸

At this point, Stieglitz rushes back for his Graflex (5×7 inch plate) film camera and returns to take the photograph of this scene, apparently still exactly as it had been

when he left it. Arriving a few days later in Paris he develops the negative plate himself at a photographer's darkroom there, one recommended to him by a Kodak laboratory.⁹

Two months later (31 July 1907), in a letter written from Munich, Stieglitz was enthusing about the new Autochrome colour photography process, the results of which he proceeded to publish four months later to accompany his essay 'The New Color Photography' in his magazine *Camera Work* (no 20, October 1907). Four months later (24 September 1907) Stieglitz was back home in New York with the 'steerage' negative. It is not until four years later that the steerage picture actually appeared in public, first as a photogravure, one of sixteen of his recent photographic works published as a portfolio in *Camera Work* (no 36) in 1911.¹⁰ *The Steerage* then begins to appear later in exhibitions and gradually is repeatedly published again as photogravures in the avant-garde magazine *291* in 1915. A separate 500 *deluxe* edition on Japanese tissue was published, which did not sell well, and most were destroyed.¹¹ Then, as is often said, 'the rest is history', only in this case it is precisely the question of history that is at issue. Why does this photograph occupy such a significant place in the history of photography, repeatedly reproduced? What is its historical value or importance? What is its importance for Stieglitz too?

Stieglitz's text on the photograph narrates the scene of the picture and 'how' he photographed it, and what it represents for him is well established. Stieglitz is explicit in expressing his alienation from his own first class status (although he unkindly blames his wife for causing this). Stieglitz looks down at a scene, 'the steerage'. The title he gives to the photograph *The Steerage* refers directly to the cheapest and literally lowest class of travel on a ship. He finds his own 'alienation' expressed in this scene before him. Excitedly, he wants to re-present this scene as a photograph. The photograph that he then makes thus also expresses this feeling, or at least, this is what his text says. Yet oddly, even though the title he gives the picture is 'the steerage', this is not what he really 'sees'. According to his text, it is only 'shapes related to each other' that he sees. It is as though Stieglitz has a special filter for his vision, which translates objects and people into 'symbols' or forms, which can signify his 'state of mind'. What does this discourse tell us about modernism and fine art photography? What is its relation to what photographers like to call the 'subject matter' of a photograph or its meaning in written language? How did Stieglitz come to be able to formulate such statements, and what are the conditions of this discourse that he helps initiate? What sense does it have for photography?

II Symbolist image

If we look at what Stieglitz says, his understanding is directly indicated in his emphasis on the visible scene as a 'translation' of his subjective feelings: 'I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life.' It is this description

of the photograph by Stieglitz that Allan Sekula regards as 'pure symbolist autobiography'.¹² Sekula argues that, for Stieglitz, 'the photograph is imagined to contain the autobiography'.¹³ In Stieglitz's discourse, Sekula suggests:

The photograph is invested with a complex metonymic power, a power that transcends the perceptual and passes into the realm of affect. The photograph is believed to encode the totality of an experience, to stand as a phenomenological equivalent of Stieglitz-being-in-that-place. And yet this metonymy is so attenuated that it passes into metaphor.

...

Instead of the possible metonymic equation 'common people = my alienation', we have the reduced, metaphorical equation 'shapes = my alienation'. Finally, by a process of semantic diffusion we are left with the trivial and absurd assertion: shape = feelings.¹⁴

The 'straw hat' and 'the funnel' in the picture are metonymic (parts standing for a whole) functioning as substitutions for 'man' and 'ship' respectively in Stieglitz's discourse. These figural meanings, as man and ship, are then read as metaphors of Stieglitz's personal alienation. Sekula demonstrates the rhetorical transition of meaning from the photograph to the written discourse of Stieglitz's autobiographical text on it, which is then projected back on to the photograph as 'its meaning'.

In Sekula's view, Stieglitz's writing constitutes a meta-language, a discourse to speak *about* photographs without speaking 'photographically'. Stieglitz's 'language' about seeing symbols, shapes and feelings is precisely a manner of *not* describing 'literally' the picture in terms of its content. This (meta)language of symbols functions to construct a theory of vision that is poetic, i.e., its rhetoric replaces the visual codes of the photograph with another type of language. These literary synonyms imply another 'language' (for want of a better word) at work, one that speaks about the photograph 'indirectly'. In this division between picture and words, image and language, Stieglitz 'speaks' the photographic image in a linguistics of forms, what has been called modernism or Western formalism).¹⁵ Sekula locates the discourse of Stieglitz within early modernist art, at the turn of the twentieth century. The 'formalist' drive of this aesthetic language abolishes the literal subject matter of the image, and instead treats its content as merely formal. Form *and* content work together to mutually construct meanings.

Allan Sekula's essay is a sophisticated critique of the 'closure' given to fine art photography (as art-for-art's-sake) by its own circular discourse. He does this by considering what kinds of information and knowledge certain photographs provide, through quality, artfulness or narrative capacity and the effect on them of their positioning within a discourse.¹⁶ In order to demonstrate different approaches, Sekula contrasts *The Steerage* with a photograph by Lewis Hine, taken two years earlier at Ellis Island, the New York port of entry at the time for immigrants to the USA. The picture, from Hine's documentary social work, shows two migrants on a gangplank.



FIGURE 5.2 Lewis Hine, 'Immigrants Going Down Gangplank on Ellis Island', (1904–1926). Gift of the Photoleague, New York: former collection of Lewis Wickes Hine, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York USA.

Sekula makes a contrast between Stieglitz's artful *aesthetic* approach to photography and the mundane *literal* description in Lewis Hine's picture, which refuses to elevate itself much beyond the theme of 'arrival', a theme repeated in its simple declarative title: 'Immigrants on a Gangplank' (1905).¹⁷ From this, Sekula sets up a series of binary differences not only between the two Americans, Stieglitz and Hine, but in their different discursive approaches to photography. Lewis Hine's photography belongs, Sekula argues, to a social-political discourse aimed at mobilizing public opinion, changing people's minds and legislation. In contrast, the high-minded aesthetics of Stieglitz's work is aimed at the spectator's 'imagination'. We might summarize these as documentary and art, as opposing discourses of knowledge/feeling, information/expression. The social realism of Hine, as evidence for social reform campaigns, is placed on one side, while formal aesthetics and art are on the other. Sekula's essay culminates in a more general summary about this 'binary folklore', described as a 'misleading but popular' argument about 'photographic communication'.¹⁸ Sekula's list of these binary categories might be tabled like this:

<i>Stieglitz</i>	<i>Hine</i>
art	documentary
symbolism	realism
seer	witness
expression	reportage
imagination (inner truth)	empirical truth
affective value	informational value
metaphoric	metonymic

Sekula makes much of these oppositions, arguing: 'Stieglitz's reductivist compulsion is so extreme, his faith in the power of the image so intense, that he denies the iconic level of the image and makes his claim for meaning at the level of abstraction.'¹⁹ This was the idea that Stieglitz paraded everywhere: what you 'see' is not the depicted (literal) object, because it is nothing but 'shapes in relationship to one another' and these shapes give rise to 'feelings'. This discourse permeates not only the writings of Stieglitz but also those around him. Here is Marius de Zayas on Picasso in *Camera Work* in 1911:

just as when we contemplate part of a Gothic cathedral we feel an abstract sensation, produced by an ensemble of geometrical figures, whose significance we do not perceive and whose real form we do not understand immediately, so the paintings of Picasso have the tendency to produce a similar effect, they compel the spectator to forget the being and objects which are the base of the picture.²⁰

This was the sort of formalist language that defined the discourse of 'fine art' photography, a 'myth' or metalanguage of criticism that claimed its own neutrality, separating it from culture, politics, the social sphere and purified of any commercial photographic value. The formalist picture aimed to offer and elevate a kind of poetic feeling. In modernism, photography was an art form intended not only to be neutralized from the rest of culture, but also from social reference altogether within the very language of its criticism. In a sense this is what Allan Sekula's complaint is about Alfred Stieglitz and what he does in his text 'How *The Steerage* Happened'. Curiously, as a photographic modernist, obsessed with the 'purity of the image' freed from the tyranny of language and 'words', and also seen by many as the origin (and prototype) of this splitting between image and writing, Stieglitz certainly could wax lyrical with words. It was one of the reproaches of those that visited his gallery that they felt verbally assaulted by Stieglitz's relentless personal discourse.²¹ The issue of this use of language is more important than just a remark about talk though.

In Sekula's argument, it is precisely this type of linguistic discourse that provides the frame for Stieglitz's art photography and the distinction of 'art' from 'social documentary'. In the critique of these binary oppositions indicated above, Sekula suggests, perhaps in a slightly complex way, that any photograph might work across these types of signification through the connotation levels of the discourse. Yet he also appears to suggest their values are embedded in or intrinsic to the actual photographs:

While the *Steerage* is denied any social meaning from *within* [his italics], that is, is enveloped in a reductivist and mystical intentionality from the beginning, the Hine photograph can only be appropriated or 'lifted' into such an arena of denial. The original discourse situation around Hine is hardly aesthetic, but political. In other words, the Hine discourse displays a manifest

politics and only an implicit aesthetics, while the Stieglitz discourse displays a manifest aesthetics and only an implicit politics.²²

Manifest aesthetics versus manifest politics? Although a documentary photograph may be treated as 'aesthetic' in art criticism, or an art photograph can be treated to a 'political' critique, the photographs are, for Sekula, already positioned by the original discourse in which they were produced. To put it in semiotic terms, Sekula argues that the signified discourse of the photographer begins to determine not only the reading of the photograph (the picture), but also the actual practical production of photographs. Yet if we follow this path, as along the chain of signifieds as set out by Stieglitz, we are condemned to tread the same weary trail, along the avenues (or cul-de-sacs) of Modernism. The signification of *The Steerage* as canonical photograph is anchored to the same old back and forth between image and discourse problematic and the status of Stieglitz as a pioneer of fine art photography. In this way any discussion of *The Steerage* encloses upon itself, and Stieglitz's autobiography as the author/instigator becomes the finality of the discourse upon it. The theme of the photograph disappears into the autobiographical discourse. In effect, this structure strangely evicts history from the discussion of the picture at the same time by containing it. If the aim (of Sekula) is to critique the discourse that Stieglitz inserts the photograph into, as an analysis of the modernist discourse, the argument makes sense, just as it is to note Stieglitz's lack of social or political consciousness. However, it is no longer adequate, as it perhaps was in 1975 when Sekula wrote his article, to condemn the photograph as 'mystical'. For it is indeed within the nature of rhetorical figures like metaphor and metonymy for 'shapes' to slide along chains of significations and signified meanings which are not necessarily via 'rational' thought processes based in consciousness.²³ Without remembering this, there is a critical closure, in which Sekula reduces the meaning of *The Steerage* picture to the later retrospective text of Stieglitz in 1942.

Curiously, Sekula's own 'reading' is in a manner that itself seems unable – or unwilling – to explore the path of rhetorical substitutions of meaning, of one thing for another, which he has himself introduced. Sekula's discourse of criticism, in effect, fetishizes the 'author as producer', with Stieglitz as the source of meanings, resulting in a critical position that more or less inevitably condemns Stieglitz's photograph to the same reading as Stieglitz's relation to the photograph and, as a consequence, the image's meaning as simply *fixed*.²⁴

Allan Sekula's general argument is an attack on modernist theory, a critique of the notion that the meaning of a picture is intrinsic to itself, i.e. meaning is embedded *within* a picture:

the photograph as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome.²⁵

Each or any discourse constructs the universe in which a meaning can take place. We can see this *polysemic* potential for different meanings of photographs demonstrated daily, when, for example, a private photograph celebrating an event is passed to a newspaper or posted online as the visual image of a wanted criminal. Given another meaning by different captions and story, the meaning of a picture is transformed by its institutional discourse. We may tend to think of such issues as a matter of distortion and bias so that an *original* meaning is always somehow there (if only we could find it), but is 'distorted' by other discourses. Here Sekula proposes that the way out of such polysemic uncertainty is to turn to ask what was the '*original* rhetorical function' of the photograph?²⁶ Sekula thus proposes a project to uncover the meaning of photographs based upon their original intention, where we can 'acquire an understanding of meaning as related to intention.'²⁷ Sekula goes on to say: 'It seems that only by beginning to uncover the social and historical contexts of the two photographers [Stieglitz and Hine] can we begin to acquire an understanding of meaning as related to intention.'²⁸ However, what if we wanted to undo the repression of social history that Stieglitz, according to the argument of Sekula, wished to hide? I would like to reverse this process and open the photograph to what the art discourse on *The Steerage* represses as latent, its 'implicit politics' and make this culturally explicit.

My aim here is not specifically to critique Sekula's argument and analysis, which did much to disinvest photographic criticism of its romanticism, but to consider what we would do with such a photograph *after* modernism? What would it mean to return the photograph to, not the matter of its provenance as an art object or commodity, as material object, 'the print', but precisely as an *image* that is symbolically trapped in photographic history as a significant picture? What might be the 'implicit politics' that neither Stieglitz nor Sekula offer up as involved in its production, the 'intention' of its author and its social-historical 'context'? It is worth pausing here to make two points, which impinge on the discussion of the picture. One is about memory, the other is about history.

Stieglitz's written description of the photograph was actually written much later than the photograph: in 1942 – over three decades after making the photograph. Why so late? What took him so long? Why so long before publishing it? Certainly, Stieglitz was never usually shy about speaking, writing and publishing his thoughts.

III Memory and History

First, the question of memory. Stieglitz's written account of *The Steerage* was published in 1942, some thirty-five years after he actually took the photograph (four years before his death, in 1946). Stieglitz's actual text, pored over by historians, is full of inaccuracies. Anyone who reads Stieglitz's written text and looks at the picture can see obvious discrepancies between them with their own eyes. For instance, his sentence: 'Only men were on the upper deck.' This is patently wrong. Even

in a poor reproduction of the picture, women are visible on the right side of the upper deck. Then, what he claims to be a 'funnel' is clearly a mast, as can be seen by the boom arm attached to it (that Stieglitz also mistakenly calls a 'mast'), which runs across the top of the picture. This boom arm acts like a visual line, a border that hems in the people at the top of the frame and separates them visually from the sky. Why does Stieglitz make such basic errors in his text?²⁹ After all, if this is the one photograph he claimed meant so much to him, why would he have forgotten the formal iconography that he would have known then, surely by heart? An obvious response would be that Stieglitz simply made a 'mistake', accounted for perhaps by old age, the duration of time since the event or a 'foggy' memory. Whether these are 'errors' in Stieglitz's memory or merely alterations he made in his mind about the picture we will not know. Let's leave this question of errors in abeyance, although their significance can return later within a different frame. Nevertheless, Stieglitz's text does something else that Sekula does not really remark upon, it *narrates* Stieglitz's photograph. The text spells out the moment of the photograph, its *peripeteia* and links it to his own feelings both before *and* after making the photograph. Stieglitz localizes the moment pictured in a duration of time external to it, its 'context', and weaves it into his personal narration of feelings, which have come to determine how the photograph is seen. The 'purely visual' is filled with the narrative art of writing. This writing invests the photograph with an intention: to evoke feelings, although he does not specify what feelings these are, beyond alienation from his own class. Acknowledging his discourse on the picture, 'his story', whilst yet still separating the photograph from it will enable us to return to it *differently*. This brings me to the second point, the question of history, as social history.

As a matter of historical fact, we know *The Steerage* was taken on a ship's journey to Europe. This is important, because it means that the people in the picture from the steerage class are people returning to Europe. If they were Europeans intending to migrate to the USA, they are in the photograph on their way back to Europe. According to Beaumont Newhall, the photograph was most likely taken at dock whilst in Plymouth, England, a few days after it had left New York.³⁰ As was customary at that time, the steerage-class passengers who travelled in the bowels of the ship were brought up on deck. The scene that Stieglitz photographs is what was called the 'third class promenade'. It was that moment in the day – every day – when all steerage passengers were herded up to the well decks so that their quarters could be cleaned.³¹ As one account put it:

If it was cold they brought with them the grey company blankets that were, by the turn of the century, included in the price of their fare. They perched on winches or in the lee of the hatches, the old people huddled about the steam pipes. Sometimes there were impromptu concerts or dances on the hatch covers that would attract a gallery of spectators from the second cabin. Slumming from above, they would lean over their promenade deck railing and throw candy and pennies down to the steerage children.³²

It was the privilege of first-class passengers like Stieglitz to have the luxury of a *choice* on such trips about whom they mixed with at leisure. The upper-class passengers could choose to join 'common people' in the steerage class, in what was called 'slumming'.³³ 'Slumming' meant going down and actually mixing with the steerage passengers. A romantic scene of slumming is portrayed in the movie *Titanic* (1997), James Cameron's Hollywood disaster film, for example, set in 1912 (five years after Stieglitz's trip).³⁴ 'Slumming from above' meant just *looking down* at the steerage class, as Stieglitz does in his photograph. As an upper-class passenger he could have joined them, as many did. Robert Louis Stevenson, the Scottish novelist and travel writer, for example, travelled by steerage class to immerse himself in the ways of steerage life, to research them and give a frisson of authenticity to his readers. He published one book, for example on different 'steerage types', recounting with enthusiasm in negative racist stereotypes, for example, the 'Irish-American' as 'for all the world like a beggar in a print by Callot', and so on.³⁵ The transatlantic ship was one of the new modern spaces where different classes might actually encounter each other in a new way. This period seems to have spawned a new popular literature about migration and a new language about everyone in it, even first-class passengers. The word 'posh' for instance from the acronym of 'Port Out, Starboard Home' (POSH), which is said to have described the best and most desirable location for cabins on each stage of the journey.³⁶ In this view, Stieglitz was a 'posh' person who 'slums from above'. The photographer, from his position on the upper deck, can see those below as a whole scene, a 'bird's eye' view of these other classes. It is this viewpoint of Stieglitz's camera that every viewer also inherits as the primary point-of-view, a position when looking at his photograph that also invites us to look down at these same people below. As a spectator we too experience the privileged overview of the first-class passenger's viewpoint, 'slumming from above' to see the emigrants who made up the steerage – the cheapest ticket of passage.

Steerage-class immigration was a massive shipping industry until World War One. The Cunard Line even paid a fee to the Austrian-Hungarian government for a regular supply of emigrants to transport to the USA.³⁷ In this way, emigrants became a kind of commercial freight, a commodity to be taken from one place to another. Big German companies built villages as collection points, 'emigrant buildings' where they would disinfect, cleanse and health-check emigrants before allowing them to board the ship.³⁸ Such were the improvements in health on ships, that poor emigrant families, it was rumoured, would attempt to time a child's birth to coincide with their travel, so as to have the best possible medical conditions for giving birth.³⁹ The port of Hamburg and surrounding area became a massive centre for emigrants to the USA, a gathering point from all over Europe. Like a town within itself, it had separate churches (for different religions), a railway station and specific demarcated facilities for processing emigrants, to make sure they met the strict Ellis Island immigration and medical checks. (Medical checks were not required for first- or second-class passengers.)⁴⁰ These precautions were instrumental to ship owners, necessary to avoid the expensive trouble of dealing

with 'returned cargo', of steerage migrants who, if refused entrance to the USA, shipping companies were responsible for. Advance inspection also helped to avoid any outbreaks of disease on board the ship, which would risk to spread across all the travelling classes and crew during the seven to eight days long sea voyage.⁴¹ Despite all these improvements to the conditions of steerage travel, the trip was far from romantic even by 1907, despite the fact that by this point in Atlantic crossings, the health, comfort and luxury had become more important than the speed of the journey.

In 1907, the year of Stieglitz's steerage photograph, transatlantic European migration to the USA was in fact the statistical peak year of all time. According to archive records, 1,200,000 emigrants were admitted to the United States, all carried on ocean liners.⁴² Many of the immigrants, like Stieglitz's German Jewish parents, had come to the USA via Germany. (Alfred Stieglitz was born in the USA.) Austrian-Hungarians, Russians, Italians and others, mostly from the poorer southern and eastern Europe, emigrated to the USA in droves. As is often the case, this influx of 'foreigners' caused an anxiety about them, about their impact on the existing (immigrant) populations. The 'Dillingham Commission' (1907–1910) and the US Immigration Commission effectively helped to put a later cap on restricting immigration during the 1920s, with laws like the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. In the earlier 1900s and 1910s the bulk of passengers on ocean liners were emigrants.

The liner that Stieglitz's photograph is taken on was the German-owned *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, one of the fastest ships of its time.⁴³ Built in 1903 it was one of four new Atlantic crossing ships with a capacity of some 1,500 passengers, 468 in first class and almost double that, at 800 in steerage.⁴⁴ The first-class facilities were opulent with the spaces and quality between different classes of travel far from equal, just as today. The garish first-class dining room, designed by Johann Poppe, was derided as 'Bremen Baroque'.⁴⁵ In effect, the luxurious spaces of the first-class passengers, in small numbers, was financially subsidized by the vast number lower-cost tickets and steerage-class passengers, who were squeezed into the small personal space bunks of the lower decks, with minimal facilities allocated to them.

Such information on the social history of migration is not 'contained' in *The Steerage*, but this photograph opens out onto that history. We might say that the value of this picture as a historical image is through its depiction of these people from the steerage class during 1907, all returning to Europe for whatever reason. Whether they were refused entry to the USA (poor health, undesirable, etc) or returning voluntarily to Europe as some did too, we do not know.

While Stieglitz's later discourse on the picture effectively pushed away all sense of these historical matters from it, the photograph did attract a direct news currency about transatlantic travel. When the *Titanic* sank in 1912 there were no immediate pictures of it available. The *Titanic* sank on 15 April 1912 and the story only broke a few days later. The *Titanic* was of course a massive international disaster, a shock not only because it had actually sunk, but also because of the appalling chaos and number of passengers who died as a result. In the absence of any images

of the *Titanic*, Stieglitz allowed *The Steerage* to be used on the cover of the New York *Saturday Evening Mail* on 20 April 1912. As Sarah Greenough notes, Stieglitz later denied that the subject matter of the picture was migration.⁴⁶ It was precisely such social and historical contexts that Stieglitz's 1942 discourse on the photograph seems designed to avoid and suppress. Why? To ensure the photograph an artistic currency, one not so quickly worn out in the 'throwaway' daily news economy of journalism?

By returning the photograph to its historical discussion of shipping and migration can this help to undo the repression of social history that Stieglitz wished to hide? The point is not that the art photograph simply has to be put back into the social historical 'context', to fill it with social meaning, but rather that historical discourse is what helps inform understanding of the social production of an art photograph. Other social discourses might be included here.

IV Stieglitz's snapshot

In 1907 the 'hand camera' was still something of a novelty. Stieglitz's *The Steerage* was included in his portfolio of sixteen photographs in *Camera Work* no 36, 1911, described there 'a series of "Snapshots" most of which were made in and about New York.'⁴⁷ It is still quite remarkable that the photographs in the magazine, produced as high-quality photogravure prints (Stieglitz co-owned the company that made them) were called 'snapshots'. The quote marks around 'snapshot' should alert us to the fact the value of snapshots was an issue then too. A decade earlier, 1897, Stieglitz had felt compelled to write an essay, 'The Hand Camera – its Present Importance', to justify the advantages of using a camera without a tripod, and to promote the handheld camera. He sets out a careful distinction between the 'You push the button, we do the rest' crowd (Kodak shooters), that is, those who 'shoot off a ton of plates helter-skelter' and the virtue of patience in his own more careful use of the handheld camera:

In order to obtain pictures by means of the hand camera it is well to choose your subject, regardless of figures, and carefully study the lines and lighting. After having determined upon these watch the passing figures and await the moment in which everything is in balance; that is, satisfies your eye. This often means hours of patient waiting.⁴⁸

Again we find the idea of the temporal instant articulated as the ideal moment for the photograph. With the *steerage* picture, however, Stieglitz did not have to wait long. On the contrary, in his own account he rushed off for his (Graflex) camera and returned to find everything as it was, still in place.⁴⁹ So what was the composition of this temporal moment that made Stieglitz want to run for his camera and away from the first-class passengers who he was travelling with? In his account he says, 'I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life. ... a seemingly new vision that held me ... people, the common people,

the feeling of ship and ocean and sky and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich'.⁵⁰ The scene he has seen in some way represents, he says, even before he has taken the photograph 'the feeling I had about life'.

Is what Stieglitz exemplifies here in his explicit wish to record this scene not that same urge experienced by anyone when they want to make a 'snapshot' of something? Is this not the desire to register with a picture-making process the urge to 'capture' something in that scene, which is more than the mere literal image? The photograph becomes a kind of shorthand, a memory device that sums up the 'feeling' of a situation, of something which manifests itself, not simply as seen 'in' the visual 'referent', but an unexplained feeling felt by its author.

In *The Steerage*, and Stieglitz's account of it, is a clear and specific prototype of the everyday attitude of a person who uses a camera to register a 'feeling', to 'keep' something that is not a 'fact' in the sense of a document, but to retain the glimpse of an affect experienced at a moment in their life. There is indeed an indefinite character to what is signified for Stieglitz in this photograph. It remains 'unresolved', semiotically *de-signified*. While in a technical sense the 'resolution' of a photograph refers to the amount of information and detail available to the viewer's eye, in a semiotic sense, the 'resolution' of a picture relates to the resolution of a meaning, one not governed in the same way by technological deduction. What this 'something' in the scene is that grips Stieglitz and makes him want to rush off and find his camera to photograph it, is surely within this scene of migration. Can we draw from this scene, of people in transit from one continent to another, a kind of parallel between Stieglitz's personal values in his description of the photograph and his desire for modern art photography status?

What are the connections between shapes and form to the feelings he expresses about wishing to be away from those to whom he belonged? Stieglitz refers to the structure of a thing (a shape) and its effect as a *feeling*. Rather than reject this as 'mere symbolist cliché', as Sekula did, should we not consider it as an issue of photographic meaning from within the discourse of fine art photography? Have we not learned that the rhetorical forms of photographs, their visual *argument* are what also establishes the aesthetic and ethical values given to them as a cultural artifact?⁵¹ Perhaps, we can return to the chain of significations that Stieglitz has already laid out for us and see where (else) they lead.

V Abstract feeling

We know that signs can signify and evoke feelings, even abstractly. This is indeed the direct intention and ambition stated by Stieglitz in his own essay on making the photograph (and his writings in general). Here it is the man's straw hat that triggers a 'feeling' in Stieglitz, although he does not say what this feeling is about. We can see that the hat that he looks at catches the light. If the hat is a 'symbol', what is its meaning? For Sekula, the hat is a metonymy for the man, but since the man is there already, perhaps it can have another meaning. In fact, it has a meaning as a hat, among the other hats. The straw hat is notably singular among the

multiple other cloth and bowler hats of the other men on the deck. The figure is the only one wearing a straw boater hat, under which he is also uniquely looking down to the deck below. In a sense, he is doing exactly what Stieglitz is himself doing, 'looking down at the people below', and offers a point of identification for Stieglitz, as he looks down to the deck below too. The highlight shine on the man's hat also touches other things too, notably the baby on the right (his left), the gangplank and, importantly, the women and children on the deck below – where Stieglitz's proxy figure is looking too. In fact, this young man is at the apex of Stieglitz's scene and camera vision. Unlike others on the top deck who are looking back in Stieglitz's direction, this straw hat figure looks down at the women and children below. This might explain why in his own account of the picture Stieglitz 'blanks out' all the women on the upper deck. Stieglitz is concerned with this man's hat, which offers a chain of signification: the hat, to the figure wearing it, to his look downwards, the gangplank, and the women figures below. Like vertical marks, the figures are picked out by the light falling on them, against the darkness behind them. The eye is led across the right-hand lower part of the picture and up the staircase, which leads to the edge and 'off frame', but also back up to the upper deck. As the light dances across these figures, women, babies and children in the lower part of the scene, there forms a chiaroscuro rhythm of light and dark tones. The lighter tones of the clothes hanging on the lower deck also help to pick out their heads and shoulders, especially the woman standing with a company blanket worn like a shawl and the seated woman next to her. This seated woman, with light hair and light falling on her shoulder, is directly in line of the male figure above in the straw hat who looks down at her. The gangplank offers a dynamic intervention into this design of the picture, and cuts across our vision of the man's look downwards, but not his.

A gangplank usually takes a passenger from one place to another, from the port to ship or disembarking, from ship to land, as in Lewis Hine's photograph. In this image it is the gangplank that metaphorically marks the transition between two decks of a ship, from one space to another. Yet it also paradoxically figures here to visually link link them, not only to separate these spaces but to clearly divide the picture into two parts. The gangplank splits the people in the scene into two groups, even though they are all from the steerage class.

When Stieglitz first showed a print of the picture to his friend Joseph Keiley, he was completely offended when he responded by saying: 'you have two pictures there, Stieglitz, an upper one and a lower one'. Stieglitz retorts privately that Keiley had not 'understood' the picture.⁵² For Stieglitz, the gangplank in the steerage picture only figures to *link* the decks to each other. Perhaps Stieglitz's affront at his friend's remark is because the idea of a division in the picture reminds him of his own alienated separation, and his longing that he might belong 'down there' too. Either way, Keiley and Stieglitz are both right, their viewpoints are two sides of the same coin: the picture is divided into two graphically, but this same graphic device – the gangplank – also links the two parts together again. It is as though the gangplank figures metonymically to signify the very travel from one continent

to another across the ocean as a process that both divides (in departure) and unites (in arrival). Curiously, the gangplank chain railings curve along in a 'wave' pattern that mimics the 'waves' of a sea: the gangplank as double metaphor for the nautical voyage from one place to another. Stieglitz makes no attempt to offer any analogies or interpretation of his description of the picture; he is content with the suggestion of 'feelings' and 'alienation' from his own class. Yet, we might ask, why would he wish to belong to this crowded deck, to be among these poor people crammed into these two decks below his own first class? Is it not curious that a man expressing claustrophobia at being in the highly spacious first class should nevertheless, in his essay at least, wish to be amidst this crowded space, full of poor people? Is this wish a literal one, to be amongst these people on the crowded decks, or is it a metaphorical longing, linked to some other abstract feeling that the scene has triggered for him? We could thus be tempted, perhaps, as others have been, to suggest a biographic reading of this scene.⁵³

Does Stieglitz, fed up with his lot and, as he says in his 1942 text, stuck in the dreary first class, see himself in this young man in the straw boater hat who is looking down at the young woman below? Does Stieglitz imagine, identify or fantasize himself as this figure, at 'another time' and space in his life? Is this figure in the photograph the *punctum temporis* of the scene, a dialectic of time and *duration* in the scene that works to 'capture' Stieglitz, as much as he has captured it? A scene populated by people who are apparently unfettered by the woes of his own 'position', his family, his class, his age, his 'world view', in short his life? We know from Stieglitz's biography that he had travelled back and forth to Europe many times before this trip. Stieglitz had been taken by his parents to be educated in Germany at the age of seven (Berlin Technische Hochschule), then again later on numerous 'grand tour' voyages to other destinations across Europe: the well-known European 'grand tour' travel to Vienna, Venice and Sicily where he practised and refined his eloquent and successful pictorialist art photography before returning to New York life.

We can begin to see, or imagine at least, the complexity of remembered personal time involved on a journey in 1907, memorialized by a photograph taken on its trip, on the ship from the USA to Europe where he re-visits a route taken many times before. A trip that is recalled for him here in the picture, and again in the essay he writes later in life about it. The written account of the picture was published when he was seventy-eight (in 1942), the same year that he finally exhibited his photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The text is retrospective, from a man looking back to a period when he was forty-three – when he took the steerage picture. Yet his description of it tells us that, when he took the picture, he was already thinking of another time, and perhaps even another place. A telescoping vertigo of past, present and future time floats across the autobiography of this image. From Stieglitz's travels twenty years before 1907 to the time afterwards, which extends forward to his 1942 written text 'How *The Steerage* Happened'. Implicit here, we might suggest, is the sort of private *punctum* invoked by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, offering a particular unconscious spark in

Stieglitz's discursive presentation of the photograph. Stieglitz's reminiscences offer a reverie, which circles around personal memory and the displacement of time in the photograph, in relation to his text. However, such biographical arguments do not illuminate the symbolic status of the picture, its significant role in the history of photography.

The Steerage stands out iconographically among his *Camera Work* photographs; it is the one image in the portfolio that least resembles the obvious pictorialism of his others. Let's put the biographical discourse and its obtuse feeling aside for a moment, and consider the question of this photographic symbolic value, its apparent newness.

VI Newness

The Steerage has a 'newness' in art photography in three ways. Firstly, it adopts a snapshot framing of a hand-held camera that radically cuts the image figures with the edge of its frame. Secondly, it uses an acute point-of-view, the camera view-point looks downwards, as often favoured in impressionist paintings of the street. Thirdly, the camera lens used foreshortens the scene and 'flattens' the image, its subject matter. In these ways the photograph appears modern, 'ahead of its time'. Ten years after Stieglitz's photograph, in 1917, he went on to champion Paul Strand and his photographic abstractions in the last issue of *Camera Work* magazine (no 49/50) as the new 'straight vision'. Strand is identified as offering an exemplary new specifically American modern vision of photography, which veered towards even more abstraction of subjects and a hard often sharp quality to the images. *The Steerage* is a precursor to this 'twentieth-century vision' of modern photography.

The Steerage picture stands as a pivotal image in the career of Stieglitz; it has neither the visual compositional structure of his earlier nineteenth-century pictorialism (horizontal framing, painterly tones) nor does it have the more crystallized 'abstraction' of the themes that he consciously developed later, contrasting natural cloud formations with the linear dynamics of American city tower buildings. Where these later images were defined as 'equivalents', taken as literal signifiers of symbolist 'moods', *The Steerage* does not avoid the human figure as these later images did.

It also seems to be true from all the evidence that Stieglitz did not himself really 'recognize' the value of the *steerage* image until later, at least not until his friends expressed interest in it, when they insisted, years after he took it, that he include it in his portfolio of photographs published in *291* magazine in 1915. According to Stieglitz's own account of this in another short essay also published in 1942, 'The Magazine *291* and *The Steerage*', he says it was his friends Paul Haviland and Marius de Zayas who said to him: 'Stieglitz, we feel that a double number of *291* should be devoted to photography, with *The Steerage* as a basis.'⁵⁴ Stieglitz then recounts the – now famous because often repeated – story that Pablo Picasso particularly

liked this photograph. The story is given in letters between Stieglitz and Marius de Zayas, the Mexican critic and painter. Writing to Stieglitz in a letter posted from London on 11 June 1914, de Zayas writes that a few days earlier he had been in Paris and had shown Pablo Picasso a portfolio of photographs by Stieglitz. Marius de Zayas writes to Stieglitz:

He [Picasso] came to the conclusion that you are the only one who has understood photography and understood and admired the 'steerage' to the point that I felt inclined to give it to him. But my will power prevented me from doing it.⁵⁵

Picasso's reported remark has echoed into a validating comment in the history of art photography, a seal of approval of *The Steerage*. Given Picasso's subsequent international fame as one of, if not the, 'greatest artist' of the twentieth century, and founding innovator of cubism, *The Steerage* is embellished with this idea that it is a cubist photograph. What is read as implicit approval by Picasso becomes an explicit endorsement of Stieglitz's photograph.

Stieglitz did meet Picasso (one of many artists including Henri Matisse and Auguste Rodin) on a later trip to Paris at the end of 1911.⁵⁶ Further credence is given to the associative chain of Picasso/cubism/*The Steerage* in that the groundbreaking cubist painting by Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 1), was painted the same year as *The Steerage*, 1907.⁵⁷ A fortuitous coincidence of dates does not mean there is a common history.⁵⁸

Yet historical dates do matter. History has imposed the concurrent discourses of art and aesthetics on visual works forming at the time. When Stieglitz made *The Steerage* and even when he first published it in *Camera Work* (no 36) in 1911, 'cubism' was still not established or even really recognised as a concept in the English-speaking world. The decisive text *Cubism* that heralded it as a new practice, by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, was not translated into English until 1913. In fact, 1913 is a more crucial date than 1907 for the relation of cubism to New York because it was when Stieglitz's 291 gallery, then the key gallery and gateway to see exhibitions of European art in New York, was suddenly overshadowed by the huge popular Armory Show (organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors) in New York in 1913.⁵⁹

Guillaume Apollinaire's collected essays *The Cubist Painters* emerged in French in 1914, the same year that Picasso had approved Stieglitz's steerage photograph. Evidence for Stieglitz's awareness of cubism might be drawn by reference to the lonely reproduction of the single Picasso drawing shown after Stieglitz's portfolio of sixteen photographs (including *The Steerage*) in *Camera Work* no 36, 1911.⁶⁰ Yet, although Picasso's drawing is the only other visual work to appear in that issue, there is no reference or any mention of 'cubism' at all. (Picasso's drawing in *Camera Work* no 36 (1911) is accompanied by a text from Plato.) 'Cubism' is not a concept in the issue. In the previous issue of *Camera Work* (no 34/35, 1911), Marius de

Zayas's essay on 'Pablo Picasso' describes his work as trying to produce an 'impression'. Indeed, de Zayas uses the word impression and 'new impression' repeatedly throughout the essay to refer to Picasso's work:

Picasso tries to produce with his work an impression, not with the subject, but the manner in which he expresses it. He receives a direct impression from external nature, he analyses, develops, and translates it, and afterwards executes it in his own particular style, with the intention that the picture should be the pictorial equivalent of the emotion produced by nature.⁶¹

While 'cubism' was announced in Paris in 1911 (at an exhibition of works including Picasso), the following year in New York the 1912 'Special Number' of *Camera Work* dedicated to the work of Picasso was still introduced as belonging to a 'Post-Impressionist spirit'.⁶² Here is a flavour:

In his paintings perspective does not exist: in them there are nothing but harmonies suggested by form and registers which succeed themselves, to compose a general harmony which fills the rectangle that constitutes the picture.

Following the same philosophical system in dealing with light, as the one he follows in regard to form, to him color does not exist, but only the effects of light. This produces in matter certain vibrations, which produce in the individual certain impressions.⁶³

Although this can be read as a textbook argument for the idea of cubism, these were themes also involved at this time in impressionism and post-impressionism. In Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger's founding book *Cubism*, they chart the trajectory as moving from a 'superficial realism' (depictions using geometrical perspective) of Gustave Courbet's work to the 'profound realism' of Cézanne, whose work, they suggest, led to 'cubism'. 'To understand Cézanne is to foresee Cubism', they claimed.⁶⁴ Whereas impressionism was an art of colour, the post-impressionism of Cézanne's work brought about a new way of seeing light, they argued and thence cubism, which was no longer fettered by superficial (photographic) ideas of actual 'likeness'. Cubism avoided 'the geometrical ideas of focus and the ray'.⁶⁵ With these developments, culminating in cubism, it is light and space that is foregrounded over 'pictorial art'.⁶⁶ So whereas 'traditional perspective' formed though geometry 'is a science', cubist art had returned art to the 'human imagination', beyond or away from pure 'science'. Here then was the theoretical argument that turned modern art against the perspectival logic of photography and geometry, its illusion of three-dimensional depth and recession in space, technologically developed since the Renaissance in Western art and widely understood to have culminated in the 'photographic image' and 'photographic' vision. The use of the term 'science' in this new theory can be understood as a reference to photography and the implication that a camera's vision is void of the artist and human soul.

Stieglitz's new aesthetic discourse on photography took a different direction. He rejected the old nineteenth-century pictorialism, with its soft focus and painterly working over of photographic prints, to modernize photography into its own new sharp 'straight vision' as it was called, exemplified by the photographs of Paul Strand.

These arguments and ideas show the more complex dynamic of aesthetic debate ongoing at that time. In short, the discourse of 'cubism' was not yet formed or in currency when Stieglitz took *The Steerage*, it appears later and is added in retrospect, long after the picture was first published in *Camera Work*. That is to say, there is a critical issue of temporality in Stieglitz's later discourse on his own picture. What was current at the time that he took the picture was very different when he publishes 'How *The Steerage* Happened' in the 1940s, already then retrospectively informed by the avant-garde art discourse of Cubism and abstraction in art. The attribution to Stieglitz's picture of a cubist intention (as inferred from Picasso's validation of the picture) comes much later. 'Cubism' is a reference added to the picture by critics, including Stieglitz, with the later critical success of 'cubism' in modern art. Although Picasso had seen *The Steerage* photograph (in 1912), it is Stieglitz who writes later in 1942: 'Picasso was reported to have said "This photographer is working in the same spirit as I am"'.⁶⁷ The later inference of this is 'cubism', projected and back-dated onto Stieglitz's picture in retrospect. By 1942 the world was a very different place. In 1942 Clement Greenberg was the new voice of USA art criticism.⁶⁸ Greenberg's 1940 essay 'Towards a Newer Laocoön' spoke of the inevitability of abstraction in art and conceded the 'present superiority of abstract art'.⁶⁹ Jackson Pollock had his first solo show in 1943 (during World War Two) and Greenberg was soon to famously promote Pollock's paintings in his art criticism.⁷⁰ This new cultural moment for American art was very different from the one that Stieglitz has bounded into as a young man, with his hopes and dreams to establish American art and art photography. If the arguments here are weighted towards positivist criticism (concerned with historical 'facts' and details of dates) this is not to ignore a critical history of this new early twentieth-century modern art and optimism for new paradigms of thought. If the spirit of construction is an association between *The Steerage* and cubism at a later date, the important question that follows is not so much when, how or where, but why? Why is this link between *The Steerage* and cubism made in the afterwardness of these events of the photograph in the discourse of art and photography?

Cubism and the narrative of twentieth-century abstraction in art is another way to situate the discourse of the photograph away from the issue of transatlantic migration that informed the picture. Cubism, with its orthodox tropes of 'woman', still life 'guitar' and other objects as spectacularly fragmented avant-garde compositions was not occupied with 'migration'.⁷¹

In contrast to these vociferous avant-garde practices, Stieglitz's *The Steerage* image offers a kind of oceanic feeling of stability and instability. On the one hand, the image is highly traditional in its optical perspectival realism, presenting its referent with clarity. On the other hand, its high viewpoint and foreshortened (compressed)

vision offers an unsettling viewpoint, which gives it a faintly disruptive aspect. There is no traditional 'horizon' line in the picture, for example, a compositional rule that governed much pictorialist photography, and its 'snapshot' framing that cut objects from vision, makes it a somewhat novel and different image. Yet all this is transformed with the authorial discourse of Stieglitz introduced to the picture: its significant form is defined as *his* 'subjective' experience, a set of feelings that remain unexplained, and abstract the spectator from their own. It is this conjunction of image and discourse that abstracts the spectator from the image.

VII Abstraction

A famous text by Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, published in 1908, places emphasis on the perceiving 'contemporary subject' as moving from 'aesthetic objectivism' to 'aesthetic subjectivism'.⁷² Worringer argues that the 'modern aesthetics' of abstraction 'proceeds from the concept of empathy'.⁷³ He defines empathy as follows:

The simplest formula that expresses this kind of aesthetic experience runs: Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. To enjoy aesthetically means to enjoy myself in a sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathise myself into it. 'What I empathise into it is quite generally life.'⁷⁴

Worringer suggests we can feel or 'empathise' our way into something, empathy as imagining oneself being this other thing, object or person, as being in their particular situation. In this theory, empathy is a kind of temporary identification with the other, a temporary affect of this experience. Worringer then links this conception of empathy to abstraction. In a sort of metaphysical drive, the artistic 'urge to abstraction' is likened to claustrophobia and 'an impulse to self-alienation'.⁷⁵ This spiritual unrest, Worringer argues, is derived from 'inner unrest', an internal turmoil that is informed by 'an immense spiritual dread of space'.⁷⁶

For Worringer, abstraction and empathy involve the retrieval of a space where there is no dread and he compares this dread with agoraphobia.⁷⁷ Such a description would seem to fit Stieglitz's description of his picture and his identification in this scenario very well: the self-alienation and dread in his spacious first class is substituted for an 'empathy' with the people 'below' whose *forms* constitute his 'empathy'. The fact that the retrieval of space with no dread may be formulated by the photograph, is perhaps what lurks in the constitution of modernist aesthetics. In it, the geometry of the photograph serves to discipline or master the sense of uncertainty of social space. This disorientation in space can also be seen at work in migration.

VIII Migration

In *The Steerage*, we find the very meaning of migration embedded in the temporal and spatial dimensions of the picture's historical form (not the author's psyche

or biography). If the newness of Stieglitz's photograph is, after all, its 'significant form', this is also part of the experience that the discourse of modernism sought, the something 'new' being proposed.

At this point we can return to *The Steerage* for ourselves. We are indeed offered an encounter at the level of social class. The spectator inherits the position of Stieglitz's camera; we occupy the same viewpoint that looks down at these steerage-class passengers. The gangplank cuts across the picture, which forms a bridge between one place and another and their separation. People appear divided into two groups, they are themselves between one place and another, between two decks on a ship, a living vessel between two continents. Across decks and docks, across the chasm between Stieglitz's deck and the steerage class there are oceans of difference. Across the Atlantic, what Paul Gilroy calls *The Black Atlantic*,⁷⁸ is also an ocean of space and time of the continents of Europe and America.

This is the scene with which Stieglitz identifies, or at least, shows an empathy for in contrast to his place in first class, from which, confessing to his wife on the ship when she finally finds him that he feels 'completely out of place'.⁷⁹ Feeling 'completely out of place' is common to the migrant experience and it is the experience that lingers around the interpretations of this image. As such there is no 'finality' of meaning of Stieglitz's *The Steerage*, the image is currently condemned to its oceanic place in history, both as a precursor of a discourse to come, of modernist autobiography and abstraction, but also of the migration of meaning, from the temporal moment of production to the site of its consumption.

IX Postscript

At the outbreak of World War One in 1914, the ocean liner that Stieglitz took his famous photograph on, the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* was docked in New York and 'interned' there (along with its sister ship the *SS Kronprinzessin Cecilie*). Refitted in 1917 (when the USA entered World War One) the ship was renamed first *Agamemnon* and then *Monticello* to be used as a transport ship to bring US troops to Europe (and then back after the war).⁸⁰ Therein lies another migration, not only of the names of ships, but the revaluation of all things that war brings.

Notes

1 Contrasting examples are Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Back to Basics: The Return of Alfred Stieglitz', *Afterimage*, Vol 12, nos 1–2 (Summer 1984); Katherine Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (London: Yale University Press, 2004).

2 See for example: Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), 111–113; Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, second edition (London: Lawrence King, 2006), 182–183; Jean-Claude Lemagny and Andre Rouille, *A History of Photography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 106–108.

Elizabeth Anne McCauley has recently added a more historical contribution to the literature in her essay, 'The Making of a Modernist Myth' in a fine detailed forensic account of the picture. See Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *The Steerage and Alfred Stieglitz* (London: University of California Press, 2012).

- 3 Dorothy Norman's biography on Stieglitz has 'A magnificent tribute to the father of modern photography' written across the front cover. Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (New York: Aperture, 1990).
 - 4 I am conscious that the word 'America' refers to both the continent and those specific territories of the USA, and that the use of it tends to obscure the different aesthetic and cultural traditions of all the other parts of the American continent – north and south of the USA.
 - 5 Alfred Stieglitz, 'How *The Steerage* Happened', *Stieglitz on Photography; His Selected Essays and Notes*, ed. Richard Whelan (New York: Aperture, 2004), 197. This later remark supersedes an earlier one by Stieglitz, who in 1899 has said his 'favourite picture' was his own 'Mending Nets', 1894. See *Stieglitz on Photography*, 60–61.
 - 6 Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), 88.
 - 7 Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' in *Artforum*, vol 13, no 5, 1975; reprinted in Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography*; and *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton (London: MIT Press, 1986). Sekula's essay was central in banging a final nail into the theoretical coffin of modernist photography, even if it took the corpse a little longer to accept its death. In 1984, Abigail Solomon-Godeau noticed a renewed interest in Stieglitz, such that she dubbed it 'Stieglitziana'. See Solomon-Godeau's essay on the Stieglitz myth, 'Back to Basics', 21–25. See also Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light*, 237–238.
 - 8 Alfred Stieglitz, 'How *The Steerage* Happened', 194–195.
 - 9 The photographer is unnamed in Stieglitz's account, but he adds: 'I wanted to pay the photographer for the use of the darkroom, but he said, "I can't accept money from you. I know who you are. It's an honour for me to know you have used my darkroom".' See *Stieglitz on Photography*, 196.
 - 10 A small-sized more easily available facsimile of *Camera Work* was reprinted in 1997. See Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work: The Complete Illustrations, 1903–1917* (London: Taschen, 1997).
 - 11 See Sarah Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set, Volume One: 1886–1922* (Washington: National Gallery of Art/Harry Abrahams, 2002), 190–194. Stieglitz's account of the 291 prints episode is given in his essay 'The Magazine 291 and *The Steerage*', reprinted in *Stieglitz on Photography*, 215–221.
 - 12 Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', *Thinking Photography*, 99.
 - 13 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 100.
 - 14 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 100.
 - 15 'Formalism' here is to be distinguished from Russian formalism, for instance, which developed a different relation of form to content, where one is not subordinated to the other, but both are mutually productive. See for example, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style', *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 52–84.
 - 16 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, especially 90–92.
 - 17 Sekula's phrase about Hine's photograph is its 'mindless straightforwardness'. Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 91.
 - 18 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 108. Alan Trachtenberg has since made a similar commentary: 'Largely through Stieglitz's influence, a polarised language entered photography criticism: factual reporting versus personal expression, art versus document.' Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990), 174.
 - 19 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 100.
 - 20 Marius de Zayas, 'Pablo Picasso', *Camera Work*, Vols 34–35, 1911 (579 in facsimile).
 - 21 Sarah Greenough: 'Stieglitz had a reputation as a talker. He gleefully admitted that he could, and did, hold forth for hours at a time delivering monologues on any and every subject.' See Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writing* (Washington: National Gallery of Art/Bullfinch Press, 1999), 27.
- Herbert J. Seligmann gave a similar account earlier in 1934. See *America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait*, ed. Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Dorothy Norman, Paul

- Rosenfeld, Harold Ragg (New York: Aperture, 1975) (a reprint of the Doubleday 1934 edition), 113.
- 22 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 103.
- 23 In linguistics, the figures of metaphor and metonymy constitute two poles for the selection and combination of units of meaning. Metaphor is based on notions of similarity, one thing is 'connected' to another, whilst metonymy is based in contiguity, and both can be found interacting in semantic systems other than language. See for example the now classic essay by Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image' in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).
- In Roman Jakobson's famous paper on the topic, cubism is a 'manifestly metonymic orientation', whereas surrealist painting is predominantly a 'metaphoric attitude'. Eisenstein's cinema uses 'synecdochic close-ups and metonymic setups', which are 'overlayed by a novel, metaphoric montage'. See Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 130–131.
- 24 A similar criticism can be made of Alan Trachtenberg's essay argument on Stieglitz and Hine, 'Camera Work/Social Work', in his book, *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990).
- 25 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 91. (Italics in original.)
- 26 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 92.
- 27 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 92.
- 28 Sekula, *Thinking Photography*, 92
- 29 Elizabeth Anne McCauley has pointed to other errors, for example, relating to the dates of Stieglitz's voyage. See her 'The Making of a Modernist Myth', 21–22.
- 30 The presumption is that there is no wind, so the ship was not sailing mid-sea. See Beaumont Newhall, 'Alfred Stieglitz: Homeward Bound', *Art News*, Vol 87, no. 3 (March 1988), 141–142. See also Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set*, 190–194.
- 31 John Maxtone-Graham, *The Only Way to Cross* (London: Patrick Stephens, 1983), 159.
- 32 Susanne Wiborg and Dr Klaus Wiborg, *The World is our Oyster: 150 Years of Hapag-Lloyd, 1847–1997* (Hamburg: Hapag-Lloyd, 1997), 159.
- 33 Cited in R.A. Fletcher, *Travelling Palaces* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1913), 159.
- 34 In *Titanic* the character called Rose, played by Kate Winslet, goes slumming with her steerage-class friend to experience the 'community' down there.
- 35 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Steerage Types' (1895), *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vol 16 (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 30.
- 36 Lee Server, *The Golden Age of Ocean Liners* (New York: Todtri, 1996), 10.
- 37 The Cunard Line paid a stipend for the government to produce 20,000 emigrants to the port annually. See Wiborg and Wiborg, *The World is our Oyster*, 155–156.
- 38 Wiborg and Wiborg, *The World is our Oyster*, 151–152.
- 39 Wiborg and Wiborg, *The World is our Oyster*, 155–156.
- 40 Rob McAuley, *The Liners* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 62.
- 41 See Wiborg and Wiborg, *The World is our Oyster*, 152.
- 42 'About 52 million migrants left Europe between 1860 and 1914, of whom roughly 37 million (72 per cent) travelled to North America, 11 million (21 per cent) to South America, and 3.5 million (6 per cent) to Australia and New Zealand. About one third of the emigrants to North America returned home.' *Encyclopaedia of European Social History*, Vol 2, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 137.
- 43 According to this author the ships of this class were already built with military purpose in mind. See P. Ransome-Wallis, *North Atlantic Panorama, 1900–1976* (London: Ian Allen, 1977), 178.
- 44 The *Kaiser Wilhelm II* ship was built in 1904 and had 1,535 passengers in total. 468 passengers were first class, 268 second and 799 in third steerage class. The crew numbered 650. See Arnold Kludas, *Record Breakers of the North Atlantic: Blue Riband Liners, 1838–1952* (London: Chatham, 2000), 87. See also Wiborg and Wiborg, *The World is our Oyster*, 145–146.

- 45 Wiborg and Wiborg, *The World is our Oyster*, 145.
- 46 Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set*, 32.
- 47 Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work*, 600.
- 48 *Stieglitz on Photography*, 65–68. We would have to wait half a century for Cartier-Bresson's version of this in the 'decisive moment'. See Chapter 4.
- 49 For a loving discussion of Stieglitz's choice of cameras and lenses see Jason Francisco, *The Steerage and Alfred Stieglitz*, especially 126–127, notes 10 and 11.
- 50 *Stieglitz on Photography*, 195.
- 51 I refer here to the trilogy of representative, aesthetic and ethical aspects of the image, as indicated in Jacques Rancière's work. I have written on these 'three regimes' of image in relation to photography, see David Bate, 'Jacques Rancière: Aesthetics and Photography', in Jane Tormey and Mark Durden, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Photography Theory* (London: Routledge, 2020).
- 52 *Stieglitz on Photography*, 196–197.
- 53 Of the various attempts at this, Elizabeth Anne McCauley's recent historical discussion of the picture broaches this in a surprising concluding comment on Stieglitz's sexuality in her essay: 'The impotence that he often commented upon in his letters found its compensation in the "feeling of release" that he got from photographing.' McCauley, *The Steerage and Alfred Stieglitz*, 65.
- 54 Alfred Stieglitz, 'The Magazine 291 and *The Steerage*' (reprinted from *Twice a Year*, 8–9, 1942) in *Stieglitz on Photography*, 217.
- 55 The date of the letter is auspicious, sent two weeks before the events that set in play the outbreak of World War One. Letter to Stieglitz, 11 June 1914, reprinted in Marius de Zayas, *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York*, ed. Francis M. Maumann (London: MIT, 1996), 177.
- 56 See letter from Stieglitz to Sadakichi Hartmann, 22 December 1911, cited in Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer*, 87. Cubism was in fact launched at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, spring of 1911.
- 57 For a summary account of the place of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* in the history of Cubism, see *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster et al (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 78–84.
- 58 Indeed, on the matter of 'influence', when *Les Femmes d'Alger* was finished in 1907 it was kept in a private collection for decades until the owner (Jacques Doucet) died. Although it did appear once in the surrealist journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* in the 1920s, it was otherwise not shown publicly until 1937, when it was bought by the then new Museum of Modern Art in New York. Suitably displayed, it was thus canonized soon after. A young André Breton advised the Parisian collector Jacques Doucet to buy Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* from Picasso. See André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 76.
- 59 The Armory Show, named after its location at the 69th Regiment of the National Guard in New York opened on 15 February 1913. 420 artworks by European artists were shown, household names today, but both exciting and scandalous at the time for the respective audiences of artists and general public.
- 60 The same drawing from the *Camera Work*, no 36, 1911 issue appears again in *Camera Work* 'Special Number', 1913, re-dated as 1913 instead of 'Drawing, 1911'.
- 61 Marius de Zayas in Stieglitz, *Camera Work*, 578.
- 62 Stieglitz, *Camera Work*, 660.
- 63 Marius de Zayas in Stieglitz, *Camera Work*, 579.
- 64 Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger (sic), *Cubism* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913), 16.
- 65 Gleizes and Metzinger, *Cubism*, 40.
- 66 Gleizes and Metzinger, *Cubism*, 18.
- 67 Stieglitz, 'The Magazine 291 and *The Steerage*', *Stieglitz on Photography*, 217.
- 68 For a useful discussion of Greenberg and Stieglitz see Marcia Brennan, *Painting, Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (London: MIT Press, 2001).

- 69 Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940) reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (London: Blackwell, 2003), 567–568.
- 70 A fascinating account is still to be found in Peter Wollen's essay 'The Triumph of American Painting'. See Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox* (London: Verso, 1993), 87–99.
- 71 A relevant exception to this thesis would be George Braque's cubist painting *The Portuguese*, sometimes called 'The Emigrant' (painted 1911–1912), but one would be hard pressed to suggest that the painting explicitly addresses migration either as an issue or even as its 'theme'. However, Braque, like Stieglitz, also pictured ports, the points of arrival/departure. Braque painted Le Harve (where he was born) in France, Antwerp harbour in Belgium, and Estaque and La Ciotat in the south of France. Interestingly, Braque's work was shown in 291 in 1914, but not in Stieglitz's *Camera Work* magazine.
- 72 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, translated from German by Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), 4.
- 73 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 4.
- 74 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 5.
- 75 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 24.
- 76 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 24.
- 77 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 14.
- 78 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).
- 79 Stieglitz on *Photography*, 195.
- 80 See Ransome-Wallis, *North Atlantic Panorama*, 11.



FIGURE 6.1 Olivier Richon, 'After Joseph Wright of Derby, Arkwright Mills at Night', 1989. Chromogenic print, 40 × 50 inches.

6

THE ARCHIVAL DREAM

The nineteenth-century notion that the photograph is a ‘mirror with a memory’¹ is crucially updated by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*:

To see oneself (differently from in a mirror): on the scale of History, this action is recent, the painted, drawn, or miniaturized portrait having been, until the spread of Photography, a limited possession, intended moreover to advertise a social and financial status. ... Odd that no one has thought of the *disturbance* (to civilization) which this new action causes.²

The photographic image already a reversal of the mirror is neither a simple ‘reflection’ of anything nor a ‘memory-trace’. Barthes argues, ‘the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity’.³ No longer a mirror with a memory, the camera is the sound of an identity being framed in time. Yet Barthes says that in the photographic process of making this alienated image it is the ‘click’ sound of the mechanical camera shutter he loves. Barthes remarks: ‘cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing’.⁴ The click sound indicates the shutter of the camera’s operation, the internal technical time of the camera and its light exposure, which is what leads to the external appearance of the photographic image as an event in time. These observations point to the seismic historical impact and effect of the invention of photographs, not only on the cultural image of human identity, but their ontological effect on human conceptions of memory and time.

As the fleeting impressions of camera ‘clicks’ are accumulated over historical time as ‘photographs’, so are their archives too, repositories piled up over almost two centuries of photography. We might speak here of the cumulative effect of photography in and on the very concept of the archive, despite the very different and varied functions that photographic images can play in them all. We should not

neglect the destruction of them too. Yet vast quantities of countless photographic images (whether as negatives, positives or other digital formats) are amassed by different institutions to now form massive image banks across the world. Some are still unseen, like the many closed formal official histories, hidden in bureaucratic files of government departments, 'scientific' work by police, medical, military and other agency archives. Yet other archives point to the many 'unofficial' histories of individuals, families and groups, often as 'mini-archive' repositories, photographic images in books, family albums, storage boxes and so on, some of which can find their way into public archives, in public museums or restituted by galleries as exhibitions and published as books, or by other organizations beyond the expanded art and photography collections of private and public entities and institutions. There are also many new duplications of these in online data archives, as digitized versions of old 'analogue' archives (as above), but revised, promoted and publicized in new ways for wider 'access'. We can supplement this list with the many new 'digital' archives produced by individuals, different social groups and institutions, some newly built online, others accumulated almost by accident on portable drives, memory devices, data hubs, mobile phones, old computers and new data storage sites. The materiality of these data storage sites, which are mostly built on land, are imagined and advertised as celestial 'clouds' of images, an imaginary space up in the sky or ether. These heavenly clouds form *dream*-images of unimagined content, memory banks that can be deleted, revised, forgotten or recalled and remembered at will (subject to encryption passwords).

To conceive of all such archives as a *dream-image* is to suggest an element of doubt about them, about their configuration, their signification and meanings. What I am speaking about is not found in sleep, but awake in the 24/7 technological day and night glare of illuminated computer screens, with their endless unfinished treasure. This is the archive as a dream space, and as a place, whether virtual or material, manifested by archival documents. Images and languages, photographs and texts combine in dream-worked images. Like the dream and its mechanisms of the dream-work, archive images are subject to revision, re-worked in the light of subsequent events.⁵ The consequence of photography is the very accumulation and abundance of these image archives.

I Image archives

We can consider all such image archives from two points-of-view. First, the original moment in which images were made and the trail of their traces over time (whether accessible to public view or not) as can be identified and described. This manifest image would include not only what museum scholarship calls their *provenance*, but also the initial function or purpose, the imagined and real (individual and institutional) 'values' involved in their production. Second, is their later recognition as *significant* (and signification) by an entity, whether it is an institution, individual or collective idea. We should acknowledge at the outset that this later re-cognition is a process of reconstruction, whatever duration has elapsed (seconds,

minutes, days, years) since the first impression of the image.⁶ This second point-of-view is crucial since the 'photographic' moment registered, the event, is not the moment when its meaning is formulated. I draw on the work of André Green and psychoanalytic theory: 'The moment it happens is not the moment when it acquires meaning.'⁷

This idea was already grasped immediately with the invention of photography. William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the positive/negative photographic process wrote in his book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–1845):

In examining photographic pictures of a certain degree of perfection, the use of a large lens is recommended, such as elderly persons frequently employ in reading. This magnifies the objects two or three times, and often discloses a multitude of minute details, which were previously unobserved and unsuspected. It frequently happens, moreover – and this is one of the charms of photography – that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he has depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls.⁸

The photographer would do well to look carefully at the picture *after* they have made it. While this is a basic proposition for a photographer today, it was a novelty in the 1840s. Before photography, painters always knew what was in an image, because they had to put it there. The temporality of the photographic image commands a different order. The photographic 'operator' discovers the image after it is made, some of it 'perhaps long afterwards' as Fox Talbot reports from his own experience. Even if the image is completely pre-planned (or mythically, 'pre-visualized') by the operator and their subject, it still belongs to the same reversed temporal order, meaning is acquired later. Just as psychoanalysis introduced a new cultural conception of time so did photography.⁹

The same latency in photography applies to the process of dream interpretation too. Meaning is acquired afterwards, so that even the photographer revises the signification of the image.¹⁰ This *afterwardness* in the temporality of the photographic image means that its legibility is more complex, since, again like the dream-image, a photograph always offers itself to be interpreted as a construction in time. Let's take a photograph by William Henry Fox Talbot.

Fox Talbot made the photograph, *Nelson's Column under Construction*, *Trafalgar Square*, on a visit to London in April 1844. In the chronological history of photography it is an 'early' photograph, which in its construction of time is seen as 'of the past', functioning now as a complex temporal *archival* image. Firstly, the photograph can be found as a material object in various archives (repositories), museums, books and multiplied again in digital formats. Secondly, the photographic image itself works as an archive of different object-signs. The photograph as a 'meta-archive', of different elements: the things included within it already have plural temporalities that are united by the photographic image. (The particular combination of these



FIGURE 6.2 William Henry Fox Talbot, *Nelson's Column under Construction, Trafalgar Square, London, April 1844*.

components only exists now in the photographic image.) The scaffolding around the column in the foreground, Nelson's Column, points to it as 'under construction' (re-signified again as 'under construction' in the title of the photograph by Fox Talbot) at the time of the photograph. The *unfinished* column is marked as the event and thus the very subject of the picture. But the figured incompleteness of the column is also given rhetorically in its visual contrast to the 'already built' church behind it in the background, a building in fact completed more than a hundred years before (in 1726). Temporality is understood *spatially* as foreground/background = new/old, present/past, unfinished/finished.

Yet the photograph also unifies these different temporal elements of the picture, it suggests a unity or contemporaneity to them. The photograph compresses them together, the finished church and the unfinished column, along the intermediary aspects: the foreground hoardings with posters on them and the hut, these all appear as simultaneous objects, at the *same time* of the picture. We should also not ignore the temporality of 'Trafalgar Square' itself as the very space articulated *as* the picture, which although it appears as obviously there, 'already built' and populated by objects, this was in fact 'new', only 14 years old, officially existing since 1830. (St Martin's church in the background of course had preceded this and is on the periphery edge of the new square.) All these different objects that appear in the photograph in this same moment and space are understood *to be* in a singular time and recognized as belonging to the same synchronic space.¹¹ The different historical times of objects are compressed into the same unified space of the photograph.

In any viewer's lingering view or glance at the image, these elements may be decompressed, and the diachronic undoing of these temporalities is what makes photography a complex signification of time. We can envisage the photograph here as a kind of capsule, not as time 'frozen' or 'captured' (to cite popular metaphors for the act of photography) but of the different topological temporalities in it. Inside the photographic image are fragments of different times, shattered and juxtaposed. We have to disassemble the 'totality' of the image and reject the pervasive normalization of attempts to unify photographs into a simple entity of 'caught' time. Photographs are multi-temporal: 'Time is itself a network, that is to say, relations expressed in and through different objects.'¹² The photograph is never an entity of time by itself or as itself. In this respect, the temporality of photography is highly unstable because it is always composed of multifarious objects/things with their own time that have no specific pre-given unity. We must add here the spectator as a component in time. The temporality of the spectator as both *observer* (of the picture's time), but then also as someone implicated in time (the time of their life), as *object* in (cultural) time, and whose duration in the reception of the image is also temporal. Each of these factors has its own effect – on the archival dream.

We may also note here (as a separate but important related issue) that the actual *technical* time of photography has itself speeded up since its invention. The historical time of photography is different. Not only are there more sensitive light receptor materials, more efficient lenses and faster shutters, etc., but the wholesale replacement of mechanical levers and cogs by electronic switches whose data

productions are linked more immediately to electronic information networks has sharply speeded up production and distribution time. The virtually instantaneous production and distribution of images also changes social and cultural time through the human image time interaction. A swipe of the finger or a slide of the thumb easily transmits a digital image from one screen to another, to multiple screens all over the world, or can edit an image in the same instant. In one gesture, a *technological* transformation is also simultaneously a *cultural* transformation in the temporality of photography: the photographic image is given another *virtual* form and technical *mobility*, in which the old essence of photography is said to have disappeared or at least has been 'de-materialized'.¹³ The ontology presence of photography is now given in a series of gestures, as the swipes and slides of digital object time. In this new mutable automation, data visual images are so abundant that photography, an 'act' and 'event' itself (the production of an image), almost disappears, becomes empirically invisible. The 'click' is now more a gestural reflex than any genuine mediatized 'event' while the photographic image is less an object on paper (except in art, museums and books) than a data point in a network amid a series of other data and meta-data materials. If the 'network society' that Manuel Castells argues exists, it is one in which individuals can act virtually and trans-territorially in new 'global' and 'transnational' modes of communication, as the means and processes of persuasion as visual information systems.¹⁴ These new algorithmic databases and database systems are archives too and change the assumptions about archives as inert materials awaiting activation by humanity.

The reduction of photographic technical time is also a certain transformation of spatial experience too: no need to visit a photography laboratory, printer's, bookshop (if you can find one) or a library, when you can print your own, from a screen, or purchase an online copy of books and images. Certainly, all such possibilities are social-demographically different and geographically uneven, but the point is that the technological transitions and mutating 'online' platforms mean we can look at an image at any time from anywhere, with access online. If we look for a Fox Talbot photograph in this context online, for example, at www.gutenberg.org the entire book of *The Pencil of Nature* and anything in it can be magnified exponentially on a screen with finger and thumb, or verbal command. The mechanical click seems like a relic to digital time.

All these issues have consequences for the idea of photographic archives and their relation to time and memory. The 'that-has-been' which Barthes had proposed as the *noeme* of photography was formulated as a singular 'pastness'. This was and is a simplification of the question of time in photography.¹⁵ When Barthes described photographs as 'clocks for seeing', he draws our attention to the temporality of photography, but what is its time?¹⁶ When Barthes refers to the 'clock time' of photographs he is really referring to *three* types (or levels¹⁷) of time at once: the *technical* time of the camera (click), of photography as the specific temporality of an apparatus; *human* time, the time of human perception, cognition and memory; and *calendar* or cultural time, the temporality of culture, its consciousness and construction of social time. Clock time 'is

only one mode of existence of time in a technical system'.¹⁸ We are thus working at the interface of human time, its consciousness and how it is affected and organized (and reorganized) in the technical time of photography and the cultural time in which these also exist and operate.¹⁹ (We might add to this unconscious time, but as we know, it knows no time.)

II Whose time?

What kind of temporal relations are organized by photographs? How does the time of the spectator affect what meanings and relevant knowledge are (or are not) brought into a photograph by them? We might envisage different scenarios of spectatorship here. Those sketched in the list below are not mutually exclusive or final. Several may be combined, varied, and their separations are only for convenience and clarity of presentation. Think of the photograph by Fox Talbot already discussed, for instance, in relation to the following examples:

- 1 Imagine someone who is unfamiliar with a particular photograph and is given nothing about what it shows and knows nothing about what it shows: they ask, 'what is this place?' With no context, reference or relevance, they struggle to comprehend the image: 'what is it for?' With no information or reference there is no specific time or temporality to the image. They quickly lose interest and move on to something else or embellish their own fantasy about the picture.
- 2 Another person, made aware of a photograph's date (its calendar time), may imagine: 'what would it have been like to be there then *at that time* in 1844 *in the time* of Fox Talbot's photograph? The spectator is here doing psychological work, fantasizing and imagining themselves 'being there'. They may even project themselves into the space of the picture's location, 'as if I was there'. The 'that-has-been' time of a photograph is telescoped into the mind of the spectator: past and future converge into an identical space, collapsed in the conjunction of the spectator's absorption in the image.

Note that neither of these examples (1 and 2) involves a spectator in any process of 'remembering' because there is no memory involved here. (In neither case have they been to the square.) There is no 'already known' relation to the picture or the scene it represents. Nonetheless, in this example the spectator may have an embodied feeling derived from engagement with the image, a sensibility which involves bodily sensations and feelings, if not any specific meaning. These effects are derived from what is socially legible to them from the photograph (the *studium* of the image). Now imagine:

- 3 Another spectator *remembers* an actual visit to the square from childhood. Fox Talbot's picture sparks a memory of their own visit, even though his photograph does not directly relate to their own particular experience. (No

one alive today could have been at Trafalgar Square in 1844.) The photograph evokes 'the past' and creates a more specific spatial/temporal distance (calendar time) that is relatable to their own past despite the picture not representing the experience of the spectator. Let's say, for example, they made an actual visit to the square in 1998. The spectatorship of Fox Talbot's photograph creates a temporal point set in the time *before* their own memory and mental image of the square. The photography triggers the memory of their own visit and experience which is forward (in calendar time) from the photograph. The time of the photograph creates the relatable temporality of this space as a 'before', of a pastness in which their own past can be situated. Fox Talbot's picture can be navigated in relation to their own calendar time. The spectator's memory is sent back to the *studium* time of the photograph, which is telescoped forward to the moment of their own experience of the square, and again forward to the time of their act of perception their future-present.

- 4 Now imagine a spectator who, whether they have ever heard of Trafalgar Square and visited it or not, finds some particular interest within the photograph (rather than its general scene). Like Barthes in *Camera Lucida* perhaps there a small detail or another feature, a tiny aspect that they cannot themselves explain their fascination for it. It might be the little hut in the foreground that 'fascinates' them, a poster on the hoarding, the scaffolding, or the church that 'grips' them, but without knowing why. Such is the *punctum*, a past personal (psychical) meaning not (yet) understood in the present. A past temporality that is future-orientated because it is still felt. A feeling is sparked as *latent*, as undeveloped, yet relevant and meaningful to them. The *punctum* disturbs, it is experienced as an affect, because aspects of its meaning are unsignified, perhaps repressed or self-censored, as the obtuse mark of a trauma.
- 5 A final different viewer might be a specialist (historian, critic, archivist, photographer, student) who scrutinizes the image with great attention to detail, as Fox Talbot suggests. They track down further potential information inside and outside the image, they magnify details, scan the image for information and use other archives and data points to check, cross-check and re-check as many details as possible about the photograph. These might include the history of Trafalgar Square as a space itself, the buildings, features and monuments located in it, their geography, why, how and when they were built there, the disagreements and political and economic machinations involved, and so on in the complexities of their histories. Multi-discursive, the specialist is a contemporary rarity, increasingly replaced by machinic algorithms that link images together in standardized networks, organized by metadata points not meanings. Perhaps this spectator would deploy a range of theories to disrupt these assumptions, modes of 'historiography', 'affect theory', the philosophy of space, 'architectural theory', decolonizing theory and other disciplines in a new mixed economy. The result: construction of a tableau scene based on archival evidence of the image.

We find in each case different forms of temporality and relations to time. The last three examples (3 to 5) are marked in distinction (from 1 and 2) as the work of 'remembering' (no 'memory' is involved in 1 and 2), but each one in very different temporal registers: social time (3), psychological time (4), and cultural historical time (5). These differences move us along, beyond the twentieth-century dynamic of attention and distraction to the more complex confusions of the effects of photography on human time.

In every case, the one same photographic image involves different sense-meanings and different temporal dynamics. Perceptive time is derived from interaction with an image, where the 'before' and 'after' of time and their duration are figured through the viewer's experience and 'reception' of the image. We might add here that the perceptual experience of Fox Talbot's photograph is unlikely to be from the same point-of-view as most visitors to the actual square take their photographs while standing in or adjacent to it, which raises the question of how far a photograph's material point-of-view colonizes our memory. Despite the fixed calendar time of a photographic image, the social, psychological, cultural and historical times of a photograph are variable. The picture involves different relations to the time of the human spectator because their duration is temporal too. When a spectator looks at a photograph, they may recognize it as from 'the past', but its 'pastness' time status (along an axis of past-present-future) is not fixed or precise. The degree of 'pastness' is not specified by the photographic image. Even where a date is given (e.g., written on its support) is no guarantee that the time felt in subjective temporality when looking at the picture corresponds to the actual 'date-stamp', the duration in calendar time of the picture itself. The experience of time requires reference and relevance to be established by the viewer. Time can be projected backwards on an image or forward in time from it too, yet in none of the above scenarios is the photograph actually itself 'memory'. A photograph is not a 'mirror with memory'. 'Memories' are relational entities in which time is negotiated by the person. Photographs are a material form for the *support* of memory, a prosthetic material device used by human memory. Devoid of consciousness, a photograph is an object-image (even as data) that lends itself to use and interpretation by human consciousness (and machinic processes), by individuals, organizations, groups and imagined communities.²⁰

The pervasive social and cultural presence of photographic images today, made up of selections and forgetting (by photographers, editors and other agencies) means that the question of human memory cannot be completely separated from photographic archives. Human memory is so intertwined with its technological supplements that it is almost impossible to separate them. Photographs help to shape human memory. Photography functions here as a 'disciplinary' bio-power because it informs and intervenes in the production of knowledge, in the production of archives as prosthetic memory banks. This is why we need to separate archives and memory as concepts (in the way the signifier and signified are separated in the sign), even while they remain interrelated and integral to each another. In the space between these two conceptual frames of archive and memory, the

archival dream is to be inserted and located. Between the archival image and the spectator's desire for meaning is the dream, an experience, like archives, that is capable of repression, censorship and unknowing repetition.

III Screening the self

One specific type of picture missing from the discussion so far here is the photograph that includes the spectator in it. It may be a self-portrait, a formal portrait, a social gathering or snapshot, or from another scene. What of 'memory' in this type of archive photograph, where the spectator is looking at themselves 'from another time'? Can we say this sort of picture *is* some kind of 'memory', a state of exception from the other examples above because it includes the person in it? What kind of temporality is involved here in the look at a photographic self-image? Is there any guarantee the image involves or invokes any actual memory? How many people have looked at a photograph and actually realized the stories told about it were (implanted) by other family members or friends, or said 'I don't remember that?' We can turn here to Freud's concept of 'screen memory' to consider the complexity of memory in such self-images as they are presented in photographs.

What Freud called 'screen memories' are most often the memory-images from childhood that haunt every individual. These memories are usually fixed visual scenes, often vivid in impression. In 'Childhood Memories and Screen Memories', Freud introduces the curious paradox of such images, childhood memory and infantile amnesia:

a person's earliest childhood memories seem frequently to have preserved what is indifferent and unimportant, whereas (frequently though not universally) no trace is found in an adult's memory of impressions dating from that time which are important, impressive and rich in affect.²¹

Why remember what is 'insignificant' and forget what was significant? Since memory is 'known to make a selection from among the impressions offered to it', the emergence of ordinary 'unimportant' memories from the past is very striking. This also raises the 'puzzle' of infantile amnesia, the common experience of memory loss from early childhood. Freud was adamant that the phenomenon is not explained away by easy claims about the inadequacies of early childhood memory. Contemporary research shows that what people remember from their childhood varies enormously, sometimes from six months old to seven and from only a few scenarios to many. In all such memories, Freud argues, 'it is easy to establish that there is no guarantee of their accuracy'.²² He continues:

Some of the mnemonic images [inscriptions] are certainly falsified, incomplete or displaced in time and place. Any such statement by the subjects of the enquiry that their first recollection comes from about their second year is clearly not to be trusted. Moreover, motives can soon be discovered

which make the distortion and displacement of the experience intelligible, but which show at the same time that these mistakes in recollection cannot be caused simply by a treacherous memory.²³

Just as other mental activities are plagued by *parapraxes* (Freudian slips) so too are memories subject to these same procedures, forgetting words, names, slips of the tongue and 'mis-remembering', and so on.²⁴ For example, when I initially thought of the photograph of Trafalgar Square by Fox Talbot, in my memory I 'remember' it as being included in Fox Talbot's book *The Pencil of Nature*. But when I check it I realize my error, it is not. Such archival 'mis-remembering' and 'slips' of memory are usually explained away as 'mistakes', errors or elisions due to tiredness or 'poor memory'. Such occasions are common events in everyday experience. For Freud these slippages involve some wish that we are not conscious of at the time. In 'Forgetting of Impressions' Freud remarks that 'distressing memories succumb easily to motivated forgetting'.²⁵

Memories from childhood that stay with the individual throughout their lives and have created strong impressions are *screen memories* Freud argues. These representations of apparently insignificant events are images that act as a form of displacement, shielding other more significant memories in the lost years of childhood. It is easy to see how photographs from childhood might intervene or contribute to this psychological function of screen memories? Does a holiday snap harbour an unhappy story which in fact did not belong to it? Is the formal portrait tainted with a happy sadness, a displacement of something else? Other archive photographs may evoke nothing. Whether innocent or insignificant, scenes from childhood life that seem inexplicably compelling and important long afterwards are screen memory images. The screen memory image itself is not to be dismissed as 'false', but as images that cover more complex latent significations and personal history. Indeed, Freud argues that screen memories contain all of what was essential to that individual's childhood. The analytical challenge, he insists is (for the person whose memories these are) to extract from the screen images the 'essential thing', the history that this memory trace is preoccupied with, but which has been obscured from memory by repression and distortion. What has been subject to distortion is not the childhood event itself (since this is no longer accessible), but the trace of it left behind in the image.

Freud writes elsewhere that screen memories appear as though they were pre-served 'spontaneously'.²⁶ As such, photographs may be considered in analogy with screen memories. We find here again the complex temporal dynamics of an image 'from the past', but now related to the archival dream-images of our own childhood. Temporally a screen memory can be: (1) *retroactive*, where the thoughts and impressions of a later date are connected (in some way) to an earlier memory scene, or (2) the screen memory has been 'pushed ahead' to a later date than it is but is still left related to an earlier memory event or experience. Freud also indicates a third type of screen memory that is directly connected with what it pictures in a contemporary (contiguous) way to that image.²⁷ In these three different temporal

relations, the screen memory works to confuse, mix or reverse temporal logic, in the back and forth projection of an image's temporality (past–present–future), just as the remembered dream-image (manifest content) loses track of its connections to its hidden (latent) thoughts and meanings. As with human memory, we can often no longer verify the original experience or sensation of the photograph, but the image provides a scene in which we may bring voluntary (*studium*) or involuntary (*punctum*) memories to bear upon it, even though the temporal relations complicate and exceed the linear arrow of time implicit in Barthes's *studium/punctum* model.

With photography, the concept of a 'screen memory' takes on a double meaning since any photographic image is most likely to be found by thumbing across a computer screen as a *stream* of images. The screen is a stream of images, speeding up the refresh rate of social memory as photographic media images are flowed through algorithmic data, now as the automated agency of archives. We can easily scan any photographic image that comes our way as a vehicle for our own memory-sources. The vast archives of social image streams are a framework *for*, but not necessarily the horizon *of* our desire and dreams, our hopes and psychical (if not physical) pains. These 'bits' of memory thus belong to 'different times and organised into falsely constructed accounts'.²⁸ We search in the afterwardness of experience for the relations between image fragments that are still present in (unconscious) presence. The plethora of photographic archives are now a ghetto for our dreams, as images are formed and reformed in the aftermath of meaning and drive of lived experience. A childhood 'memory', then, for Freud, is not what it seems, just as a photograph which acts as a prosthetic supplement to memory is also not what it seems.

Neither true nor false, screen memories are psychical realities, scenes organized by the subjectivity of this person. As such they are more like fantasies *about* a childhood. Freud suggests that screen memories offer 'a remarkable analogy with the childhood memories that a nation preserves in its store of legends and myths'.²⁹ Furthermore, fairy tales, he says, can 'be made use of as screen memories in the same kind of way that empty shells are used as a home by the hermit crab. These fairy tales then become favourites, without the reason being known'.³⁰ Are photographic images now also taken up as 'empty shells' and occupied by memories?

Is it possible, for instance, that Trafalgar Square is an image that functions as an 'empty shell' image for a nation? Can it be considered as one such 'childhood memory', the 'early years' of the nineteenth-century nation-state of Britain? The building of Trafalgar Square and the formation of other such public spaces in other cities belongs to the screen memory project of 'nation-building', in this case the 'British Empire', long since passed but not forgotten. Fox Talbot memorializes this emergent new public space, as a kind of Forum or Agora for London, which was still in construction at the *time* of the photograph. The square, Nelson's monument and the invention of photography appear at the same time, all new structures which the photograph memorializes and commemorates as events. (We might say photography has other functions too, but these does not preclude the overlap with its screen memory function here.) Photography and these images in its archives impact individual, cultural, social and historical formations of identity. Through the ever

present and growing 'viral' expansion of images across archives and their networks of discourse, photographic images have come to 'occupy' the psychological lives of most living human beings. Here we can understand Barthes's remarks in *Camera Lucida*, when it comes to the presentation of the self in photography: 'For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.'³¹

Even if people feel themselves to be immune to it, much of the mass effect of this logic was implicitly recognized in the episode of 'postmodern art' that appeared at the same time as Barthes's essay.³² The sudden interest by artists in the photographic effects of media representations on subjective identity and social discourse was presented in the work as a convergence and merging of self-presentation and cultural representation. Postmodernist art exemplified these questions of identification, raised through the experimentation of artist practices. Artists like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince literally took media images made by others (art and advertising respectively) as *their own*. Other women artists like Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons reconstructed 'already known' (media) images of women in their own way. Many of the 'pomo' artists' work showed the contemporary pervasiveness of Freud's concept of 'screen memory'. Instead of remembering what is forgotten, screen images supplant it. Some works seemed to attempt to remember, by scrambling together different fragments, assembled like a dream collage, to 'try to make sense' of dissociated fragments which implicitly held other stories. Some artists turned to action, they 'acted out' images in repetition and photographed them, as Cindy Sherman did in her mimicry of stereotypical women, movie characters and social 'types', etc. The disseminated media images of cultural identity are remade as questions about subjectivity through re-performance art photography. Media images were scrutinized and absorbed for what their surface 'empty shell' images could enigmatically conceal. What is revealed in this art production, a historical moment that enjoined art to culture, was a symptomatic questioning of the effects of the photographic image on culture and identities. In effect, the art highlighted processes that are now culturally normalized. What appeared as an emergent cultural confusion about the temporal space of the present was due not to the 'collapse of history', but to a culture flooded by images of its past more than being gripped by its future. The popular cultural recycling of the past, crucially mediated via the photographic image and its pluralized archives, is not so much a theory of the dream-work being 'applied' to cultural artefacts, but of the dream (as a wish) becoming the mode and template of cultural life.

This is the proposition of the *archival dream*: that someone drawn to an image is activating a drive in the guise of a wish or desire, or even something undesirable, as an aim in that person's or the culture's imagination. Between the history of the individual and their social relations lies the political subjectivity of belongingness. It is here that the question of the archive and its functioning as a dream-image is given its cultural importance. In our dreams, images come to us as if from nowhere, apparently from 'outside' ourselves, yet at the same time too are our own product and productivity. The dream is the product of the body and its social experiences.

(This is also how, in a ‘post-truth’ discourse someone can apparently resolve the contradiction ‘this is *my* truth’.) Much as with dreams, an archive image may appear *desired*, fascinating, troublesome or difficult, and yet be forgotten or censored again instantly. Meanwhile another image can linger long in the aftermath of its experience. The sleep of reason awakens in the archival dream-image that we choose as individuals, as part of different communities, national and international cultures. (Or do these images choose us?)

IV Archival dream

We might consider then the complex ways in which a specific image can come to figure as an archival dream-image. In what way has the photographic image come to inhabit, occupy or colonize the psychological image of a cultural place? I use the term ‘place’ here in its anthropological – human – sense: defined as a particular location held in common by the people who inhabit it over time. This conception of place (home, office, public gathering place) is differentiated from ‘space’ as what people *move through* to a ‘place’ they (individuals or groups) gravitate towards as meaningful.³³ Place encompasses space, but space may not include a place. Such a distinction between space and place is crucial for the way we may feel ‘at home’ (or not) in certain photographs.

I will take as example the place demarcated as the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. This is because the Acropolis is a real space *and* a mythical place as the origin of democracy – despite being originally dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena. The Parthenon, as one of the several famous remaining ancient ruins on the Acropolis, is seen as the very place and foundation of the origin of democracy.³⁴ People travel to see the Acropolis because of its ancient history and the remains of buildings’ ruins on it, the most famous being the Parthenon dating back to the 430s BCE. The Parthenon was badly damaged by gunpowder explosions inside it in the siege of 1687 but has become a historical ideal, source and monument for the idea of democracy, embedded in its modern representatives everywhere as a city square (e.g., Trafalgar Square) where people can ‘freely’ gather. Even though, neither the Parthenon nor the Acropolis is anything like a square. The Acropolis is actually a ‘mighty rock’.³⁵ For centuries, travellers made their way to Athens as a ‘pilgrimage’ to the Acropolis on their ‘grand tour’ around Mediterranean Europe to see these remains of the great ancient civilizations: Greece, Rome and beyond, some venturing further to the ‘Orient’, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, north Africa and Jerusalem, etc.)

Before photography, even an actual traveller to Athens was reliant on writings about the Acropolis for its ‘visibility’. For others who never visited the Acropolis as a place, its ‘image’ was thus conjured up primarily through the perception of writings and speech, supplemented with sketches or drawings. My point is twofold, firstly, for those who had never been to visit the place in person, the disseminated image was a set of literary tropes, images and ideas manifested individually as psychological or mental images, not *visual* images. This was the dominant cultural experience before photography. Secondly, as a result of this, the image of

the Parthenon was not visually *fixed* by the laws of perspective, geometry and the monocular point-of-view of the camera lens. This is not to say that pictures of the Parthenon did not pre-exist photography, of course they did (and very exclusive in visibility), rather that the relation to these was secondary to the primacy of language, which was held as the source (truth) of representations. It is only with the invention of photography that this linguistic dominance of place shifts towards a new modern more 'visual' dynamic relation to language, which is what defines and distinguishes the modern era from its past difference.

The first traveller known to make a trip to the Acropolis with a camera is Pierre-Gustave-Gaspard Joly (de Lotbinière) in October 1839, a Canadian businessman.³⁶ He travelled to Athens with the new Daguerreotype process patented by Louis Daguerre just months after its official launch, earlier that year in July 1839.³⁷ Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey is also often claimed to be the first photographer of the Acropolis, but he visited two years later in 1841.³⁸

In a remarkable consensus still valid today, the photographers who visit the site quickly converge on the same viewpoint to photograph the Parthenon.³⁹ Taken from almost identical positions it is as though this was the only position from which the Parthenon existed as an image of itself. It was as though (and still is) that the



FIGURE 6.3 Engraving of the first photograph of the Parthenon. Daguerreotype photograph taken by Pierre-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière in October, 1839. Engraved by Frédéric Martens. Published in *Excursions daguerriennes* by Noël Paymal Lerebours in 1841. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.

Parthenon is only recognized as a ‘place’, can only really be seen and ‘identified’ as such properly from one specific position. My argument is not that this is the only view of the Parthenon produced, but rather that this becomes *the* view of the Parthenon. (Whilst other angles and viewpoints do exist, these other points-of-view always appear as ‘other views’, as artificial, ‘creative’ or deconstructive diversions from the one true spot from which it is *really* seen.) The photographic view of the Parthenon on the Acropolis is ‘framed’ by photographers, and its main historical identity as a visual experience is established. Photography is seen to circulate a kind of epistemological certainty in visual knowledge about the existence of that which others had said existed.

Photographs of the Acropolis were then (when the process enabled it) reproduced, disseminated and circulated; its image was sold as prints, lithographs, engravings, aquatints, paintings and later exponentially as postcards and tourist industry brochures, etc. The ‘Parthenon on the Acropolis’ became established as an archaeological tourist ‘attraction’. But its visual image did not return us to the past, rather it brings antiquity into the present and gave it a new modern cultural presence. But the temporality of the photographic image is not only of the object



FIGURE 6.4 Francis Bedford, ‘South West View of the Parthenon’ on the Acropolis, Athens, Greece, 31 May 1862. Albumen print on card. Royal Collection Trust. Bedford was an accomplished architecture/landscape photographer who was asked by Queen Victoria to accompany a royal tour in 1862, when he took this photograph.

presented (the archaeological object of the Parthenon), it is also fused together with the technical time of the photograph and in the technological codes of its image. The Acropolis and its objects are given a new modern visibility and temporal condition. No longer lost somewhere temporally vague, as 'the past', but *here* within the technological 'date-stamp' and time of the photograph. Photographs of the Acropolis are a convergence, a condensation of different times into one presence. To look at the photograph 'now' brings a spatially distant place into our present, no longer 'elsewhere' but in the here and now. The dream time of the photographic image telescopes the past and present dialectically together. The so-called 'that-has-been' of Barthes's temporal pastness is divided between the ancient Parthenon and the photographic 'yesterday' in which it exists as photograph in our image perception 'today'. This is what make the photographic image already an archival dream-image, it offers the memory apparatus 'a synthesis of different times into one time' already long before the new data processing technologies of today.⁴⁰

A social satire on the perception of such temporal disjunctions is made explicit in Martin Parr's 1991 ironic photograph on the Acropolis from his book *Small World*. Parr photographs the Parthenon from the same spot as his many predecessors have but uses a wide-angle lens and colour film. Parr's point-of-view camera is from over the shoulder of a figure who is photographing their tourist group. The tourist



FIGURE 6.5 Martin Parr, *The Acropolis*, Athens, Greece, 1991. © Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

photographer cuts into Parr's frame and the Parthenon is reduced to a background prop for tourist photographs. Another group seen gathered together further back on the left facing away further inhibits the view. Parr's photograph points to the commodification of the tourist industry: the Acropolis is one stop in a line of destinations where a photograph is required to validate the group's experience. The monument is relegated to a background image, a historical backdrop for the modern tourist photograph. In doing this the picture inadvertently highlights the temporal disjunction, the time difference between the ancient monument's presence and modern tourism, seemingly oblivious to its historical importance. Parr's focus on the human presence prises apart the historical fantasy of photography's direct access to the past. The people function here unwittingly as a direct reminder of the 'date-stamp' of photography, the temporality that the camera brings as a technology of imaging. As a result, the condensation of time that a photograph effects between its rhetorical elements (e.g., the monument and people) is pulled apart, if only for an instant in the perception of its humour.

We can find another playful disruption of the Acropolis and Parthenon scene by Laurie Simmons in her postmodern photographic series *Tourism* (1984). In Laurie Simmons's 'unreal' aesthetic, the photograph shows three toy women figures, whose dainty poses suggest a gesture of surprise, one waving at the scene behind, the 'Parthenon'. The picture has a striking overall blue tungsten cast and the garish highlights on the bodies of the foreground figures suggest they are plastic dolls. The grainy background image of the Parthenon is slightly distorted and suggests it is a back projected image. The 'fakeness' of the photograph starkly contrasts with the *real* photographic codes of other photographs of the Parthenon. The 'blue' colour already suggests a mood and the feeling of subjective memory (cyanotype colours invented in the 1830s). Colour shift is a long and well-established reference in photography and cinema codes as a 'memory-image'. A memory-image is *faded*, or rippling into the past, as fuzzy or out-of-focus. Similarly, unusual colour casts signify temporal shifts, turning towards the 'past' in the visual codes of a memory-image. The whole experience of Simmons's photograph, the doll figures and the remediated image of the Acropolis together make the spectator conscious of the signification processes of the image and their own work of cognitive processes involved in its perception. All these contribute to a feeling of distance towards the realism of the objects in the image but simultaneously a subjective mood is cast over this perception. (In some versions the photograph is also reversed, appears like a mirror reflection image with the Parthenon image reversed too.) The photograph shifts cognition away from the assumed combination of referential codes of photography that usually defines its status – one of its key conditions for knowledge acquisition is completely disturbed. While the image offers a semblance of the Acropolis's temporal-spatial image, the normal conditions of its 'real' perception are disrupted.

Simmons's Acropolis scene disrupts the preconceived image of it so that the experience of the Acropolis is 'derealized', a term introduced by Sigmund Freud. Freud's own bizarre experience of visiting the Acropolis haunted him for years



FIGURE 6.6 Laurie Simmons, *Tourism: Acropolis*, 1984.

after his actual visit in 1904. He wrote about it decades later as ‘A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis’ in 1936.

Arriving at the Acropolis Freud is shocked to find his own thought on seeing that it actually exists. He writes:

When, finally, on the afternoon after our arrival, I stood on the Acropolis and cast my eyes around upon the landscape, a surprising thought suddenly entered my mind: ‘So all this really *does* exist, just as we learnt at school!’⁴¹

Freud is amazed to hear his own doubt about the existence of the Acropolis. He was already certain in his mind that it did exist – with his long passion for classical history and archaeology – and finds himself split between two voices: one surprised at the skepticism and disbelief of the other. If he had had no doubt about it before, why did *seeing* the Acropolis suddenly provoke this idea that it may not have existed? Why was his memory cast in doubt by seeing the real thing? Is this a strange reality effect of seeing the real? Freud asks, did this other voice reveal that ‘in my unconscious I had *not* believed in it’?⁴² He rejects this theoretical question and instead traces back the strange experience on the Acropolis to other memories, which is the method he encouraged in his patients too.

Freud links this experience on the Acropolis to an earlier experience on the same trip in Trieste, Italy, where Freud and his brother had decided to go to Athens to see the Acropolis for the first time. After some indecision about going (on visas and logistics) they booked the tickets but once they had done so, both fell into an inexplicable depression. They both reacted to actually going to Athens as if they

were not able to go. Despite Freud and his brother being delighted to finally visit the Acropolis they became depressed or, as we might say, fell into a 'bad mood'. This strange response to the trip is reversed on arrival at the Acropolis, the elated feeling that the Acropolis does exist is accompanied by a sense of disbelief. Why would Freud's own pleasure at going there become so displaced into the shock idea that the Acropolis might not exist?

The experience of '*What I see here is not real*' Freud names as a 'feeling of derealization'.⁴³ A *derealization*, he argues has a 'purpose of defence', 'they aim at keeping something away from the ego, at disavowing it'.⁴⁴ He notes, 'I made an attempt to ward that feeling off, and I succeeded, at the cost of making a false pronouncement about the past.'⁴⁵ This is the second general characteristic of such derealizations – 'their dependence upon the past, upon the ego's store of memories and upon earlier distressing experiences which have since perhaps fallen victim to repression'.⁴⁶ I

Freud observes that in his own past memory/experience he never doubted the existence of the Acropolis in childhood, but recalls his childhood desire to travel and the poverty of his family at that time which made it seem unlikely that he ever would travel:

My longing to travel was no doubt also the expression of a wish to escape from that pressure, like the force which drives so many adolescent children to run away from home. I had long seen clearly that a great part of the pleasure of travel lies in the fulfilment of these early wishes – that it is rooted, that is, in a dissatisfaction with home and family.⁴⁷

The disbelief (*Unglaube*) of the Acropolis (and the depression in Trieste) is a distorted feeling of guilt in Freud towards his own father and poor family. It is that Freud himself has 'come a long way' (further than his father) both literally and metaphorically, which surfaces as a form of guilt in the same moment of his satisfaction in finally seeing the Acropolis. The sudden uncanny doubt about its reality is the result. Freud acts as though he cannot believe he is there, but this incredulity of actually *going* to see the Acropolis in Athens is displaced, shifted onto the place itself as a question about whether the Acropolis was there *at all*. Freud notes:

in an undistorted form this should have been 'I could really not have imagined it possible that I should ever be granted the sight of Athens with my own eyes – as is now indubitably the case!'. When I recall the passionate desire to travel and see the world by which I was dominated at school and later, and how long it was before that desire began to find its fulfilment, I am not surprised at its after-effect on the Acropolis; I was then forty-eight years old.⁴⁸

Doubt about one thing (will I ever see the Acropolis?) is distorted into the doubting of a past and the disbelief that the Acropolis existed. What would be the motive for such a distortion in his own memory?

The journey travelled to the Acropolis meant going a long way further that his father ever had, either literally or metaphorically: 'It seems as though the essence of success was to have got further than one's father, and as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden.'⁴⁹ In Freud's eyes, the beautiful sight of the Acropolis is as Jacques-Alain Miller argues colonized by 'the gaze of the father', Freud feels guilt at surpassing his father, but this is expressed as disbelief in what he sees.⁵⁰ The work of Freud's little case-study shows the complex relations of perception to memory, the play of temporality and the disturbance within it. The perception of the Acropolis is directly affected by the derealization effect on his memory.

Can we compare Freud's experience on the Acropolis with the 'derealization' effect at work in Simmons's photograph? Either way, what we *can* recognize is the presence of unconscious motives in perception as linked to memory, its distortions and the question of screen memory. Photographs are not exempt from these questions, these displacements and aesthetic processes that affect and fluctuate the perception of the real and unreal. Between the characteristics of the photographic image and the presentation of its referential object is the viewer's dream space, the 'working through' of memory and the strange aesthetic experiences derived from looking at images.

We may no longer be in the same kind of social-cultural deference to the grip of the paternal father image as experienced by Freud. Laurie Simmons's photograph indeed resituates the Parthenon image in relation to femininity and the image of Woman, or even perhaps to the Greek goddess Athena to whom the Parthenon was originally dedicated. We may also link the derealization at work in Laurie Simmons's image back to the Christian Dior fashion image, shot on the Acropolis in 1951. In a way, these photographic images return the Parthenon image back to the temporal fantasy of the past, back to an imaginary ancient Greece and the original function of the Parthenon as a temple and place for worship. Similarly, the Parthenon, removed from its geographic location in Athens, features and figures 'fully restored' in the animated computer game *Assassin's Creed*, which, played by millions, realizes the Parthenon in cultural memory, divorced from its geographic place just as it is already virtualized by its full-scale three-dimensional replica built in 1897 in Nashville, Tennessee, USA (demolished and rebuilt again in the 1920s). The temporal ambiguity of our photographic time revives the past in the present like an archival dream.

Notes

- 1 Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph' (1859), *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (Newhaven: Leete's Island, 1980), 74.
- 2 There are several important theoretical and practical observations to be developed here about the dialectics of mirror images, photographic portraits and their roles in the constitution of identity, but it is not the aim of this chapter to develop them here. However, it is certainly worth noting that smartphone cameras typically replicate the mirror reversal image on the facing ('selfie') lens and the normal camera lens image for the outward camera lenses. Barthes's comments on the 'dissociation' of the photographic portrait from the mirror image can obviously be situated in dialogue with the well-known psychoanalytic theory of the 'mirror-stage' by Jacques Lacan.

- See, for example Victor Burgin, 'Perverse Space' in *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (London: University of California Press, 1996) and Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006).
- 3 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.
 - 4 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.
 - 5 The reference to the *dream-work* is to Sigmund Freud's concept, elaborated in his revolutionary 1900 book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Pelican Freud Library, Vol 4 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).
 - 6 See Stuart Hall's short essay 'Reconstruction Work' on the importance of re-thinking colonial photographs, in *Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s* (Tèn.8, Vol 2, no 3, Spring 1992).
 - 7 André Green, *Time in Psychoanalysis: Some Contradictory Aspects* (London: Free Association Books, 2002), 32.
 - 8 See William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, text with plate XIII, 'Queens College Oxford', www.gutenberg.org/files/33447/33447-h/33447-h.html#fig8. Accessed August 2020). See also Larry Schaaf, *In Focus: William Henry Fox Talbot. Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002), 82.
 - 9 *Nachträglichkeit* or *afterwardness*. André Green notes the issue of translation that *Nachträglichkeit* means both past to present but also present towards the past. See André Green, *Time in Psychoanalysis*, 164, note 4.
 - 10 André Green, *Time in Psychoanalysis*, 32.
 - 11 The experience of the photograph is qualitatively different from the experience of being in the square itself in real life, where the oldness and newness of different objects are easily perceived.
 - 12 Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 181.
 - 13 Digital theorists are busy working on the conception of the 'digital object'. See, for example, Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects*.
 - 14 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
 - 15 'The name of Photography's *noème* will therefore be: 'That-has-been,' or again: the Intractable.' Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.
 - 16 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.
 - 17 The notion of different conceptions of time as 'levels' is from Jean Laplanche, 'Time and the Other', *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999).
 - 18 Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects*, 175.
 - 19 Jean Laplanche writes: 'To deal with things from the point of view of the unconscious, the level of perceptual temporality and of immediate consciousness primarily involves the preconscious-conscious relation – that is, access to my *personal archives*.' (My italics.) See, Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, 101
 - 20 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983). I have addressed the notion of photography as a prosthetic memory device, see David Bate, 'The Memory of Photography', *Photographies*, Vol 3, no 2 (2010).
 - 21 'Sigmund Freud, 'Childhood Memories and Screen Memories', *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Pelican Freud Library, Vol 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 83
 - 22 Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 87.
 - 23 Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 87.
 - 24 Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is the classic text on these parapraxes.
 - 25 Freud, 'Forgetting of Impressions', *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 199.
 - 26 Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 84.
 - 27 See also Sigmund Freud, 'The "Mystic Writing-Pad"', *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Freud Pelican Library, Vol 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984). 427–433.
 - 28 Green, *Time in Psychoanalysis*, 39.
 - 29 Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 88.

- 30 Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 90, note 1.
- 31 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.
- 32 See Craig Owens, 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism', *October*, Vol 15 (Winter 1980).
- 33 The distinction is offered by Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 42.
Augé also indicates a contemporary challenge to this distinction when he coined the term 'non-places', which he uses to refer to the new supermodern spaces that *seem* like 'places' (e.g., airports, shopping malls, etc.), where people gather to do things, but which somehow lack the actual functioning characteristics of a 'place'.
- 34 An interactive 3D model of the Acropolis from 165 CE is available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acropolis_of_Athens#/media/File:Acropolis_3D.stl
- 35 Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations and its Prospects* (London: Penguin, 1990), 188.
- 36 See Jenifer Neils, ed., *The Parthenon: from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 335.
- 37 The key document here is Dominique François Arago whose report on Daguerre's invention was presented to the French government in July 1839. See 'Report' in Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, 15–25.
Pierre-Gustave-Gaspard Joly de Lotbinière (1798–1865) was born in Switzerland, a wealthy businessman and 'amateur' photographer, meaning he took pictures for pleasure rather than commerce. Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey is also often claimed to be the first photographer of the Acropolis, but he visited two years later in 1841. See note 38.
- 38 Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey was a trained artist in Paris, France, who quickly took up Daguerreotype photography and did the long grand tour, visiting the 'Middle East' as well the Mediterranean Europe between 1841 and 1844. He photographed the Acropolis and the building on it extensively from different views, so his photographs form a remarkable historical record of the disposition and condition of the buildings on the Acropolis at that time. See Stephen Pinson, Sylvie Aubenas, et al, eds, *Monumental Journey: The Daguerreotypes of Girault de Prangey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 39 It is suggested that the first picture set the 'paradigm' for all the rest. See Neils, ed., *The Parthenon*, 336.
- 40 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Time Today', *The Inhuman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 62.
- 41 Sigmund Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', *On Metapsychology*, Pelican Freud Library, Vol 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 449.
- 42 Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 449.
- 43 Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 453.
- 44 Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 454.
- 45 Freud also contrasts the effect of derealization (and similar episodes such as depersonalization) with the common and apparently positive memory illusions of *déjà vu* or *fausse reconnaissance*. Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 453.
- 46 Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 455.
- 47 Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 455.
- 48 Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 451.
- 49 Freud, 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis', 456.
- 50 See Jacques-Alain Miller's discussion of Freud's essay on the Acropolis. Jacques-Alain Miller, 'The Sovereign Image', *The Lacanian Review*, no 5 (2018), 46–47.



FIGURE 7.1 Aram Bartholl, 'The Perfect Beach', performance in public, 2018. 4.50×3.20 m (performers, aluminium pipes, flag canvas print). Courtesy of the artist.

7

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EPISTEME

What is a 'photographic episteme'? A photographic episteme would be to consider photography as an epistemological entity, as a mode or system of knowledge. What kind of thought and knowledge does photography involve, produce and organize? An epistemic model of photography would have to consider and account for different forms of discourse that make up the disparate practices, theories and attitudes at work in photography. These would include the various ideas about photography held by photographers, newspapers, web editors, curators, audiences, scientists, non-specialists and the myriad of specialists that make up the various specific photographic industries of advertising, prosumer, anthropology, architecture, art, fashion, journalism, news, travel and social media to name only a few obvious examples. The photographic episteme would be what epistemic values underlie these many different disciplines of photography. What kind of general ideas can be identified about photography as epistemic, despite all the different varied local and global uses, and diverse contradictions and conceptions that arise from them? It is precisely through these disparate photographic discourses and their various institutional and cultural uses that the photographic episteme can be construed, charted and constructed. An episteme has plural discourses that may overlap or have contradictions yet do have some kind of unity and unified values despite obvious differences. For example, we are already keenly aware of the divisions in theories and histories of photography, where different accounts are divided between scientific or artistic modes of thought, as objective or subjective and whether photography deals with the real or ideal, or virtual too. The contradictions between these divisions that constitute what photography is held to be are an 'episteme' in which photography operates and is allowed to be operated in different practices.

While this conception of photography in terms of an episteme has not yet been formulated, it already raises a number of other questions. One of these, an obvious

question can be added here: has the epistemic value of photography changed since the invention of photography? If so, in what way? Might this be related to other epistemic conceptions of practices in different formations and discourses? And then, is there something specific about the post-modern condition and subsequent digitization of communications media that marks a period of transition? Has there begun, in the twenty-first century, some systematic and symptomatic changes that appear in, through or affected by photography too? If we now live in a so-called 'post-medium' condition then why still cling to the term 'photography' if it has all but disappeared into the general 'media' of global cultures? What would be 'epistemic' in the changes to the condition of photography and in what way might those conditions be conceptualized as *epistemic*? What might have brought all this about?

All of this is already to suggest or even suppose that such a project is possible, whether what we call 'photography', a term sometimes as vague in meaning as the term 'writing', even has any unity in its practice, across such obvious social and cultural dispersals. If we can at least admit that photography offers a vital form for social knowledge (beyond the diverse difference within it) then such a project is worth considering. However, before these questions can be addressed it is necessary for some ground clearing about the conception of episteme, and what it is not.

I Episteme

An episteme or epistemic point-of-view of things is not *doxa* (common opinion) or *history* (the chronological story of its 'development'), a *philosophy* (the ontological status) of its essence, nor is it an aesthetic definition (its formal beauty or effects of its 'identity'). A photographic episteme may consider these things, but instead of those quests to find the 'essential characteristics' of photography according to different disciplines, as has been tried so many times before, an *episteme* aims to identify what it is that makes it possible for things – like photography – to function as a mode of knowledge. The episteme would be the way all different practices of photography in their diverse cohesions and contradictions add up and are conditioned as being within certain limits. An episteme is the account of the ensemble of regularities that govern its existence in specific discursive formation. This would mean, for instance, considering not just the new values that were ascribed to photography's inventive vision as a mode of 'seeing' (the claims for objectivity and subjectivity), or the fact of its pervasive reproducibility (compared to painting at that time for instance), which was quickly developed across a range of institutions (whose own institutional values in turn were impressed upon photography), but also the new ways that photographs began to interact, for example, with language, which in turn modified language and has mutated communication patterns, structures and systems through these interactions. We would have to look here for both continuities and discontinuities, in the way there is no clear established historical

precursor (for example in painting or drawing) that developed before photography which could be compared or seen as equivalent to the many specific new plural interactions developed between photographs and language in all their novel sophisticated institutional uses. (One has only to look at image–text interactions in advertising images to see the massive diversity of rhetorical innovation across the last century of photography.) Since its inception, photography has been integrated into virtually all communication structures, disciplines and social cultural practices. Photography's profound impact on all institutions and social behaviour is now all too often taken for granted, it just seems to exist as 'obvious' in what it is and what it does.

It should already be clear that, in pursuit of an episteme of photography, we would have to consider the way that the many systems, relations and dynamics of photographic imaging practices are related as a set of techniques to other epistemic changes, social and cultural practices that are intertwined with photography and of which photography is also a part too. I am hinting, and pointing, here towards the conceptual framework of Michel Foucault, the French intellectual whose innovation it was to think of the history of Western culture and society as a series of different epistemes, conceived of as historical 'moments'.¹

Michel Foucault's work is widely used and cited in the humanities and beyond, but he has nevertheless remained a marginal figure in photographic theory and criticism. Even in its heyday his work was, although used, marginal, perhaps partly because he never really addressed photography directly.² As such, the epistemic question has not been asked of photography, beyond Foucault's specific concepts of surveillance and power and his model of the medical gaze. For this reason, I will refer directly to Foucault's work on the episteme to introduce it to photography and the issue of the photographic image as a system of knowledge. The detour into cultural theory is necessary here, if only because it is the framework in which the practices of photography also exist and need to be situated.

In his book *The Order of Things* Foucault sets out three epistemes: the Renaissance, the classical period, and the modern episteme.³ Towards the end of the book he hints at a possible end of the modern episteme and its horizon of man, as something he calls contemporary culture. However, I will defer this discussion until later. These epistemes are characterized as historically 'discontinuous', as made of distinct and different values and modes of knowledge: the Renaissance episteme is based in *resemblance*, the classical period in the epistemic model of *representation*, and the modern episteme as that of 'man'.⁴ Foucault fleshes out his argument about these three epistemes across the book by addressing specific disciplines within them and which constitute the source of his evidence. These are the discourses of biology, economics and language. In Foucault's other separate books, his work on medicine, sexuality, discipline and prisons, he similarly shows how these practices and the discourses that sustain them transform, within each different episteme, into radically different conceptions. 'Madness' for instance in the Renaissance can appear in public as the 'wise fool'

(in Shakespeare's plays for example), whereas in the classical episteme madness is reconstructed as something to be *excluded* from society, hidden and confined (put in chains) as the opposite of reason and rationality. Specific spaces (asylums) are constructed to conceal the 'mad' as outcast (except sometimes in illicit exhibitions as a visual spectacle). In the modern episteme, madness is reconsidered through the developing 'human sciences' (biology, psychology, sociology and psychology), where the old opposition of madness versus sanity (in the classical age) is revised, reorganized and variably diminished through differential examination. The human body becomes a new feature of discourse revised through medicine and 'science' which interrogate it as a social, psychological and semantic object, and reveals a hidden interiority, emergent in new concepts such as schizophrenia, trauma and psychosis. There is also a new central role for language in these analyses too, and Foucault charts the way language is understood so differently in different epistemes. Similarly, the history of sexuality Foucault sees as a series of abrupt historical shifts, less framed through concepts of 'progress' and development than distinct different epistemic frames and modes of knowledge.⁵ Could Foucault's epistemic framework in some way help shed light on the perceived shifts and mutations in photographic discourse? The post-modern? How might photography be considered in terms of the epistemic model of Foucault's framework?

II Photography

Given its brief history, photography is an invention that emerges within the modern episteme of the early nineteenth century. Yet, as any student of the history of photography will know, the invention of photography has a pre-history. Several of its various technological components can be dated back to the Renaissance or even earlier beyond that.⁶ Geometry and perspective, for example, were key components in the developing pictorial systems in Europe since the 1400s, and the laws of light and optics were formulated later in the classical era. Yet at the same time photography obviously did not exist then as a technology or as a mode of knowledge. These types of issues of continuity and difference are central to the question of the epistemic value and function of photography today. Let's go back to Michel Foucault's work.

Curiously, while Foucault's book *The Order of Things* traces the historical epistemic shifts through discourses of biology, economics and language, the whole book actually begins with a chapter dedicated to the analysis of a painting. Although this visual analysis has become famous and read in its own right, it is rarely linked to the epistemic arguments formulated in Foucault's work. The relation of pictorial space to the epistemes has not been developed.

The painting is *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez, the famous 1600s Spanish court painter. Foucault makes explicit the epistemic dimension of this picture. His choice of it and the analysis relate to its explicit conception of representation, as a representation of the concept of representation, which heralds the then new



FIGURE 7.2 Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656 Museo del Prado, Madrid. © Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado, Spain.

episteme of the 'classical age', leaving behind the old age of Renaissance, the episteme of resemblance (similitude). Foucault proposes:

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion, which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance.⁷

The painting demonstrates the concept of representation that governs the classical era: the spectacle in the painting exhibits this new logic of representation. Classical perspective, often seen by later critics as photographic, is used in the painting to offer an illusion of spatial depth as a spectacular site for the eyes: a room full of court dignitaries and other representations, as paintings hung around the walls of the room. (The paintings in the room are already configured and ordered according to the taxonomies constructed by the classical episteme.) The painting shows a painter (Velázquez) at his canvas who looks out at the viewer. The painter has paused to look at what he is painting. Who or what is he painting? It is not only the court subjects who are nevertheless shown and 'represented' in the room of the painting: the princess who is (almost) at the centre of the picture, her maids and the other figures attending in the room. While these represented figures appear as the object of representation of the painting, there is another one, which is missing. What we cannot see is what is on the canvas of the painter in the picture. He looks out as us, but we are surely not the subject matter of the painting. So, what or who is it? The subject of the painting is surely what the painter and the key figures in the painting are looking at: whatever is in the space that we temporarily occupy as spectators. Clearly the painter in the picture is not painting us (back in 1656), even though we may feel he is looking at us. As viewers we are literally 'not there'. Although we temporarily occupy this place as modern viewers, it is always given back at the end of our looking to whoever was originally there as its subject: the king and queen of Spain. While they appear to be absent from the painting, these royal figures are represented there as a trick, seen only in the mirror reflection painted on the back wall of the painting. This is the brightly lit rectangle on the back wall (no doubt the 'brightness' of their image is also a technical feature that aims to show how they are 'illuminated' as royal beings) that distinguishes them as against the other pictures represented on the back wall. The absence of these royals mirrors our own bodily absence from the picture, our existence is established through engagement in the world of representation. The painting makes visible the logic of representation. Representation aims to repeat 'the theatre of life or the mirror of nature', to show its external appearance *as it is*.⁸ Yet there is an absence

created by representation, which is shown here by Velázquez; the absent royal personages figure only through a technological 'trick', their faces and portraits painted into representation as a mirror reflection on the rear wall of the room of Velázquez's painting. The painting contains the very logic of representation; the truth-value of the picture is continually suspect, since the founding 'presence' of the look which it is organized and constructed for is absent, except in a trick device, a mirror.⁹ Representation cannot reveal its own deceit, the world is formed as representation in the (object-ive) 'language of things'.¹⁰

In the dwindling presence of God, the same period sees the *camera obscura* also taken up as a philosophical model. The camera obscura is used as a metaphor in classical philosophy (René Descartes, John Locke and others) with the human mind compared to a dark box, the external world bathed in light as representation. The camera obscura is a machine and a philosophical metaphor for making representations. In the representational system of the classical episteme 'man' is absent, as in Velázquez's painting. 'Man' as such is absent from the system. (Only the disembodied sovereign presence of the symbolic king and queen's gaze is seen, reflected in the bright mirror on the back wall of the painting.) The system of optical representation might be operated by persons but they do not appear in it. Even where they do, as Velázquez does, appearing as a self-portrait in his own picture, it is to demonstrate the very logic of representation. Once the world is conceived as representation it can be compared, evaluated and ordered according to new schemes of identity and difference. This classical episteme of representation articulated by Foucault gives way (at the end of the eighteenth century) to the modern episteme of 'man', in which the human now becomes central. (Foucault uses the masculine term *homme* in the original French language, as French grammar required. Instead of this usual English translation of the term as 'man', I will prefer and will henceforth use the other more general meaning of that term as 'human'.)

While the Renaissance episteme treated geometry as a logic of resemblance and similitude, the classical era 'sees' geometry as a means of representation (a concept whose vagaries still haunt considerable areas of popular thought on photography and issues of cultural identity). (Renaissance vision was always a moral eye for knowing 'divine wisdom'.¹¹) How might the developing use of geometry and perspective, for example, of the classical period be related to the received ideas of painting and theatre as aesthetic conventions in the modern era and its organization of knowledge?

In the modern era, geometry and perspective are understood and read through a new polemic, not as 'representation' (or at least not in the way that term is used today), but of the centrality of the viewing subject, the very being and point-of-view of the person, as a projection of 'mankind' itself. It is the human who is centred by the new discourses of the modern episteme, rather than representation. Even the camera obscura metaphor is revised. The new centrality of the human/camera eye in the modern episteme inverts the old model of the camera obscura, the analysis of picturing serves the analysis of the human being in the modern episteme.

In Karl Marx's famous use of the visual metaphor, the received image inside the camera obscura is upside down, a remark intended to show that the human is not (only) absent in representation but is alienated by its 'upside-down' appearance in the life-process.¹² The representations that ordinary people are subjected to become, for example in Marxist ideological critique, a 'false consciousness' derived from those representations. It is mankind who is now the focus of the discourse, whose subjectivity is interrogated and who emerges through these and other discourses on the human. Representations are scrutinized for what they construct about humanity, whether as 'alienated', a concept and argument that developed in sociology and psychology, or as the object of the social sciences more generally. Representation as such does not disappear but is now (in the modern episteme) seen as the product of mankind, whose efforts have formed and determined those representations.

What we can learn from Foucault's model of epistemic analysis is that even though something like the system of geometry and perspective and its parallel history of the camera obscura may appear as a *continuous* development (in terms of its historical presence), they are in fact conceived in very different ways, in the different historical epistemes. One thing, like the camera obscura, is imagined, differently governed, conceptualized and thought as a quite different epistemological object in different historical moments. It can thus only be seen as continuous if the specific historical differences of its cultural conceptions are completely ignored. Rather like in the novel *Don Quixote* is the figure (a transitional figure) who is relentlessly mocked because he sees the world through similitude rather than representation. 'He is the hero of the Same', Foucault says.¹³

This is the argument in Foucault's conception of the episteme and why his work is so often seen in opposition to 'traditional history'. The episteme does not conceive of the past as simply a set of causal relations of one thing leading to another of historical chronology (the narrative convention of storytelling), informed and conditioned by concepts of progress and development, as in 'this led to that' and so on. The history of photography as a discipline has stalled under the weight of that traditional model of 'history' as constant progress. Instead, an 'archaeology' of epistemic knowledge, which recognizes the specific 'layers' with their own 'ecologies' of production, can offer a better productive model to understand the sense and logic attributed to photography. The different epistemic conceptions become perfectly clear as different when considering, for example, the struggles of Alfred Stieglitz to identify a discourse for art photography. The personal presence of 'man' (sic) is articulated through the discourse that is called modernism, itself struggling to identify what makes itself (as a discourse of art) distinct from other mainstream media communication products. It would be a mistake to imagine that any one person is ever responsible for any epistemic shift or transformation, it is rather that, as Foucault indicates in his work, specific discourses and agents of them are the surface of emergence of an episteme's mutation and enable us a way to see the symptomatic aspects of transformation.

Such levels of argument are of course *abstract*, subject to accusations of ignoring the cut and thrust of everyday politics and arguments about life, its limits and

possibilities. But it is Foucault's view that the figure of mankind is what itself becomes the object and space of knowledge in the modern episteme, as a network of knowledges. Photography is clearly central to this space of modern epistemic knowledge. If Foucault's arguments are to be accepted, then the object of photography in the modern era is also that of mankind. Photography is invented in the period when an industrial process of image-making excels, is desired and taken up everywhere as a new form of knowledge. When Fox Talbot takes up the serious objects around him to photograph, hieroglyphic scripts, teacups, buildings and leaves, it is on the cusp of this modern episteme of knowledge. The obsession with what photography can *represent* at the beginning of photography becomes within a few decades a scheme of classification of the human. The classification of everything that exists to be put in representation, the project of the classical episteme is accelerated and quickly becomes more focused on the representation of mankind, its body, its achievements, its spaces and modern thought.

III Modern photography

In 'modern photography', which is typically understood as the early twentieth-century transformation of photography, it was the discourse of 'new vision' that photography celebrated. At the beginning of the twentieth century, we find a number of competing discourses on 'modern' photography that take the camera as a model for the human eye. There is a time lag here. Some discourses relate to the classical episteme's ambition to represent the world according to schema that are mathematical in inspiration, which Foucault refers to as *mathesis*. The machine that produces representations is no longer a dark box (metaphorically), but the agency of humanity, its human eye 'vision', its 'feelings', its 'truth', its fantasies. The dark box is a psyche, whose social body manifests its place in the world through its projected images. This model of 'photographic' knowledge is what allowed the photojournalist to speak of empathy for its object, the artist of its unconscious, the scientist of its rationality.

The new centrality of the human is the marvel of 'mankind' in the modern episteme. The title of the exhibition, *The Family of Man*, still the most toured and globally famous photographic event, places its dramatic emphasis on both its empirical (anthropological) viewpoint and its transcendental value of humans. It parades an essence of humanity in its *diversity* and geo-politically *different* conditions that is made present visually as a magical *unity*, that is, of mankind as what also serves, to borrow the words from Foucault, 'as the foundation of his own finitude'.¹⁴ Mankind is both the foundation of representation and its object of knowledge. Photography as one of the modern discourses contributes to the images of these new human sciences, as a means to know mankind: 'as that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known'.¹⁵ It is in this sense that photography can be conceptualized as double, as both objective and subjective, as scientific and artistic, because both polarities relate to the conception of mankind, but in different ways: as the 'objectification' of the domain of subjective experience. The camera is linked to objectivity and subjectivity.

As some level this objective/subjective issue is what haunts the discourse of Alfred Stieglitz (see Chapter 5), as the absence of human experience in the concept and discourse of photographic representation. It is this absence which he struggles to enunciate through the practice of art photography (and those around him) at the turn of the twentieth century. It is a discourse whose very interiority seems to elude him (and his linguistic discourse on art photography), albeit that at the same time its subjective presence is sensed as 'representable', if only unconsciously.

It is this discourse of subjective interiority that returns as fully present in Roland Barthes's essay *Camera Lucida* (see Chapter 2), where Barthes's *studium/punctum* distinction effects a paradigm shift during the 1980s. His binary opposition heralds a new distinction between the public and private sense of photographs, not in terms of their relation, but in the sublated hierarchy. The private meaning is privileged in a new way, which he mixes in with a traditional objective/subjective dichotomy, whose hierarchy is also inverted. Barthes overturns the normalized *social* objective value of the photograph for its *personal* value, its 'inner' subjective value (which is then objectified). Now the private experience of the photographic image begins to flood and overwhelm the *social* processes of signification, which photographs were conventionally said to primarily contain. The subjectivization of photography in the late twentieth century (when even documentary photographers began to talk about their 'subjective' viewpoints instead of claiming the 'truth' of their representations) points quite precisely to the logic of the modern episteme described by Foucault of 'mankind' as the object of knowledge. Photography's growing function in the modern episteme emphatically becomes primarily related to the discourse of mankind. It is not only that there is a cultural shift in the consciousness of the social and political impact of photography, of its emotional effects and unconscious psychical affects, brought to light not only by Barthes but other theorists too, of the photographic image on audiences, but that these concepts become more integrated in the whole production process of image-making. Photography becomes itself a mode of subjectivity. It is not an exaggeration to say the photographic image *is* the image of the human body in some cases, as its alienated identity.

In the final chapter of *The Order of Things*, Foucault hints at a beyond of the modern episteme that he frames as the 'struggles' of 'contemporary culture'.¹⁶ He notes these struggles are in the relation of language to mankind:

From within language experienced and traversed as language, in the play of its possibilities extended to their furthest point, what emerges is that man has 'come to an end', and that, by reaching the summit of all possible speech, he arrives not at the very heart of himself but at the brink of that which limits him; in that region where death prowls, where thought is extinguished, where the promise of the origin interminably recedes.¹⁷

Foucault refers as his example of the 'brink' of this 'limit' to avant-garde works, by the surrealists, Antonin Artaud, Franz Kafka, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and others who began to fragment language. They separate language from its

representational function, 'language stripped naked', which begins to tunnel out the very modern episteme that enabled it. We can parallel this critical argument about language with the regime of photographic images which, in the guises of photography and cinema, is part of the modern episteme's transformation of language. It is not that the images of photography and cinema have replaced language, but they have short-circuited aspects of its requirements, replacing the necessity for long descriptions, sensory functions and specific literary modalities, which in this way have changed what language does too. One has only to think of photobooks or different cinematic forms to see a whole panoply of new ways that images have supplanted so many narrative and verbal structures in language. There is another parallel in Foucault's reference to avant-garde literary work on the materiality of language, which applies just as much to images too. That is to also recognize the important function of avant-garde and modernist art in photography practices, in their interactions, where there was so much work in and on the image and its various indices of the human body and cultural space. Furthermore, the 'critique of vision' that is central to many theories of the photographic image in the twentieth century was often also manifested as a critique of 'representation' too. These can be seen in constructivism, surrealism, modernism, conceptualism, situationism, and differently in postmodern critiques of pictorial representation.¹⁸ We might see all these as intimations of 'the dim light of dawn', as Foucault described it, of something else emerging.¹⁹

These topics of avant-garde and modern art and photography have of course been discussed elsewhere. It is instructive to consider photography more specifically here and interesting to note that Jean-François Lyotard frequently cited the appearance of photography as bringing an end to painting:

Photography brings to its end the programme of metapolitical ordering of the visual and the social. It finishes it in both senses of the word: it accomplishes it, and it puts an end to it. Know-how and knowledge as worked out, used and transmitted through studios and schools, are objectified in the camera. One click, and the most modest citizen, as amateur or tourist, produces his [sic] picture, organizes his space of identifications, enriches his cultural memory, shares his prospectings. The perfecting of today's camera liberates the user from worries about the exposure time, about focus, about aperture, about development.

...

With the photo, the industrial *ready-made* wins out.²⁰

In a way, Lyotard's argument about photography mirrors that of Foucault's conception of a developing contemporary eclipse of the modern human in language. But we should add to this process the profound impact of photography. In what I call the 'globalization of the photographic apparatus' the history of mankind is amplified in its image: a globally produced multiple amplification of increasingly fragmented narratives, smaller linear sub-plots which nevertheless proliferate

exponentially. As new chronologies, the positivity of these narratives is also the pluralization and proliferation of the figures of mankind into 'language' which are also manifested in new technological forms. Foucault suggests that it is this new 'return' of language that in a new way comes to figure the end or 'disappearance of man' of the modern episteme:

If this same language is now emerging with greater and greater insistence in a unity that we ought to think but cannot as yet do so, is this not the sign that the whole of this configuration is now about to topple, and that man is in the process of perishing as the being of language continues to shine ever brighter upon our horizon?²¹

The 'being of language' proliferated within language and – I insist – its images are what now haunts humanity in archives beyond the systems of the imagination. The recycling of the past extends over the psyche of the social present, the humanoid's memory functions and horizon as a 'being in language'.

IV New time

This brings us to the question of the end of the modern episteme and whether postmodernism was a symptom or actual beginning of an epistemic shift, slide or collapse. Was it an inkling of something else? A new 'contemporary' episteme governed by different other modalities of knowledge? Is the human disappearing from centre stage as object of knowledge? How are we to situate that which is called the post-modern here? And what of 'photography' as a mode of knowledge? Writing in the heyday of postmodernist disorientation, Lyotard nevertheless suggests some kind of finitude and new freedom to photography. Lyotard:

Photography is released from the responsibilities of ideological identification it had inherited from the tradition of painting, and it henceforth gives rise to research. Photographic art appears, and it is exercised jointly by professional researchers and by artists, as is the case in the other industrial arts.²²

Lyotard suggests that photography can be liberated from its modern self, from its normalizing social symbolic functions, 'ideological identification' and such. Is this not what the excitement was about that derived from Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, that it seemed to offer a liberation from social responsibility, replaced by personal affect? The freedom to say, 'I am wounded'? We might note that contemporary photography is still torn by alternating logics of 'restoring reality' or the 'unimaginable', which figures as a question of an infinite 'unpresentable', whether as human interiority or representational space (or both) in their failed relation to nature.

Lyotard's concern gravitates towards the question of how mankind will survive the emergent new technologies and the computerization of society described in his

writings (already in the early 1980s), still pre-Internet.²³ Today the new materiality of 'digital' computer-orientated societies offers itself as the phenomenal discursive framework for a new episteme, its new focus on machinic 'languages' of computing, which integrate and eclipse the characteristics and memory-function of mankind or even its bio-power. These new industries raise the question of how and what is to be written, to be said, to be seen and produced by machines. The disappearance of the camera obscura into data processing (the zeros and ones) that constitute the simulacra of representation: is the camera obscura any longer a model for human thought and its images? Is the subject and object of mankind now just integrated into an episteme of screen data and unconscious processes?

Foucault writes in the *Order of Things* of what it is in the human sciences which enables mankind to be itself the object of knowledge:

But to imagine that the human sciences defined their most radical project and inaugurated their positive history when it was decided to apply the calculation of probabilities to the phenomena of political opinion, and to employ logarithms as a means of measuring the increase of intensity in sensations, that would be to take a superficial counter-effect for the fundamental event.²⁴

Logarithms became algorithms and the measurement of 'intensity in sensations' are the new 'cognitive' industries, as a real social and economic interface in mankind and communications systems. For Foucault the 'fundamental event' is language, life and work, which for mankind are:

what enables this same being to know (or seek to know) what life is, in what the essence of labour and its laws consist, and in what way he is able to speak.²⁵

Photography needs to be understood as integrated into these social processes, life-language-work, in all the cultural spheres, that they are evaluated, as machinic communication processes: economic, political, psychological, cultural, social and semiotic aspects of data language.

In Lyotard's work these issues of humanity and technological language are already linked, in the light of postmodernism as a condition of knowledge, to questions of memory-effect, of human time and memory: 'the impact of the so-called new technologies on the syntheses that constitute space and time'.²⁶ In his 1986 essay '*Logos and Techne, or Telegraphy*', he announces that avant-garde practices offer a kind of 'working-through' model that navigates techne-language. Lyotard borrows this concept of 'working-through' from Sigmund Freud's fascinating 1914 essay '*Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through*'.²⁷ The three key words of Freud's essay title each nominate a different conception of memory-effect, as *differing* effects of the past and memory (on language or writing): *remembering*, *repeating* or *working through*. The first category is the ordinary habit of *remembering*, of drawing on the past as a narrative that turns back towards an earlier origin and beginning. The second category of *repeating* is the 'compulsion to repeat', where

a past event (often traumatic) returns unconsciously in that person's actions. The memory of the event is not recalled but nevertheless operates to organize a habit that the person is unaware of, usually described as 'acting out'. The third concept, 'working through' (*Durcharbeiten*), relates to the processes of 'free association', the later technique used by Freud and encouraged in his patients to use too. Lyotard sees this last 'working-through' as the kind of work that artists do. As such, it offers a good model for resistance to technological norms of memorization.²⁸ (Lyotard uses the term *anamnesis* instead of 'working through'.) Despite Lyotard's own reservations (which are hardly explained) his own reference to Freud's essay is useful as remembering, repeating and working through offers three modes of machine/human relations to the past and memory.

In working through the issue of new technologies that preoccupied him, Lyotard in fact replaces Freud's first term 'remembering' with *scanning*.²⁹ In the humanoid integration with digital technology this seems an accurate modification. Do we now not more usually tend to habitually *scan* images rather than 'look at' or 'remember' them? Aside from art, where the temporality of looking is usually extended more than elsewhere, is it not now usually the cognitive practice of 'scanning' images their everyday function, as we 'thumb' them across a screen – as though we are ourselves a computer evaluating their image use-function? (A machine also now remembers them for us, and re-triggers the 'memory' date on anniversaries of uploading them for example.)

The second term, *repeating*, was incidentally a key feature of postmodern culture (the 'acting out' of commodity culture), is the process of endlessly recycling past images in new ways, as a bricolage of debris from the past, or as new assemblages, re-enactments and a performative kaleidoscope of references (see Chapter 1) from the past and its archives. The 'new' interminably reproduces the past in new combinations and mixes in which all unconscious origins are lost. If knowledge is lacking in the procedures of repetition, it is nevertheless in re-performativity that there is perhaps a model for machinic creativity (like the slowly mutating mathematical rhythms some types of music are accused of doing)?

In the third concept, *working through* suggests a different process, as a matter of finding a way to 'work through' material and resistances to it. Working-through is here an issue of 'negotiation', the productivity of a person's particular struggle to 'find a way' through the psychological experience of existence, that at least was the work to be done in Freud's view.³⁰ It is this procedure that involves resistance: on one side to the synthesis involved in scanning and repeating, and on the other, to the divisions and resistances embedded in their own memory – which is anyway perhaps in dialogue with the first two modes of memory effects and the prosthetic machines that automate the will to remember (whether you want to or not). So, it is the memory of the person, such as it is, that works through material and the various resistances (whether internal or external) to them in creating something new.

The contemporary camera operator is not just holding a smartphone, digital or even analogue camera, but the product of a photographic episteme, with its assumptions, inherited values, historical contradictions and difficulties which are

also embedded in that very figure, the social subject holding that camera too. As Elizabeth Grosz has remarked:

I do not access my consciousness from another consciousness: likewise I do not access the objects I perceive and act on from the outside. To the extent that I engage with and work on such objects, they are presented not to me so much *as* me. I participate in an overflight of their qualities.³¹

What Grosz calls the ‘incorporeal’ is a category of thought that refuses the binarism between human matter and external environment or the reductive models that try to resolve them. What seems to be on offer here is some kind of reflection and address to the issues raised by Foucault on the transforming epistemic values identified at the end of *The Order of Things*. The disappearance of mankind into language, which itself is ‘disindividuated’ into the new registers of digital technological culture, means that a different register is required to comprehend these processes. In this sense, the idea of ‘photography’ that we retain is no longer a subject/object model, one designed for subjects to ‘capture’ the world, to represent it as an object (this does not stop people trying). Rather it is to recognize these different components as the constituents of material and matter of contemporary distributions. The question remains what these entities aim to remember, repeat or work through in their contemporary distributions. In the end, the disappearance of the human, of ‘mankind’, is related to the emergence of the Anthropocene. The human is now both subject and object of nature, and ‘post-photography’ is one of its contemporary effects.



FIGURE 7.3 NASA image. Apollo 11 Mission Image – ‘View of Moon Limb, with Earth on the Horizon’, July 20, 1969. Image Credit: NASA/JSC

Notes

- 1 It would of course be another and completely different project to address what is assumed there as 'non-Western discourses' and the 'epistemic' values that pertain to them.
- 2 The key figure to introduce concepts from Michel Foucault's work into the discipline of photography was John Tagg in the 1980s. Tagg used Foucault's work on power and knowledge to examine how photography had been used by state institutions (the police, local council and state agents) and inadvertently by the population to introduce itself as a subject of state control. As the title of one essay put it, photographic representation was 'A Means of Surveillance'. See John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).
- 3 Published in French in 1966 (and 1970 in English), Foucault's book *The Order of Things* was out long before the concept of the postmodern really took hold of intellectual life in the 1980s. (Michel Foucault's life ended in 1984.)
- 4 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1980), xxiv.
- 5 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981).
- 6 See David Bate, 'The Idea of Photography' in *Art Photography* (London: Tate Publications, 2015).
- 7 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 16.
- 8 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 21.
- 9 Some may see a link between this analysis and Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror-stage in which an infant imagines their body-image as coherent because the mirror reflection offers an image space for being in which they can construe the illusion of the 'self'. See Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psycho-analytic Experience', *Écrits* (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006).
- 10 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 59.
- 11 See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 103–105.
- 12 Karl Marx: 'If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.' Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Part One* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), 47.
- 13 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 46.
- 14 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 341.
- 15 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 345.
- 16 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 382.
- 17 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 383.
- 18 The literature on the critique and inadequacy of 'representation' is vast, even within the field of photography theory. This book sums up some of the critical negativity around: Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (London: University of California Press, 1993).
- 19 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 384.
- 20 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Representation, Presentation, Unrepresentable', *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 120–121.
- 21 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 386.
- 22 Lyotard, 'Representation, Presentation, Unrepresentable', 124.
- 23 Lyotard was aware of early versions of digital networks, the French Minitel system installed in homes via telephone as a communications network, and also his ground-breaking exhibition, *Les Immatériaux* held at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, 1984 and co-curated with the design theorist Thierry Chaput. The exhibition dealt with the computerization of society, already addressed in *The Postmodern Condition* some six years earlier.
- 24 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 350–351.

- 25 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 353.
- 26 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Logos and *Téchne*, or Telegraphy', *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 47.
- 27 Lyotard, 'Logos and *Téchne*, or Telegraphy', 47–57.
- 28 See also the essay by Yuk Hui, 'Anamnesis and Re-orientation: A Discourse on Matter and Time', *30 Years after Les Immatériaux: Art, Science, and Theory*, ed. Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015).
- 29 Lyotard, 'Logos and *Téchne*, or Telegraphy', 51.
- 30 See Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through', *The Penguin Freud Reader*, edited by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006).
- 31 Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 219.

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PICTURE CREDITS

- 0.0 David Bate, *Screen Memory*, 2020.
- 0.1 Barbara Kruger, 'We Don't Need Another Hero' billboard project (London), *State of the Art*, 1987. Photograph by the author. The billboard was one of many that accompanied the Channel 4 TV series called *State of the Art* that aims to set out the conditions and debates of 'postmodern art'.
- 1.1 *Screen* film theory journal cover (with detail of Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still 21*), 1983. Photograph by the author.
- 1.2 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still 21*, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 9½" (19.1 × 24.1 cm).
- 1.3 Benetton clothing advertisement, billboard, London, c. 1990. Photograph by the author.
- 1.4 Walker Evans, 'The Work Boots of Floyd Burroughs', 1936. Credit: Everett Collection/Bridgeman.
- 1.5 Edward Weston, 'Shoes from Abandoned Soda Works, Owens Valley', 1937. Photograph by Edward Weston. Collection: Center for Creative Photography © Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents.
- 1.6 Andreas Gursky, *Untitled V*, 1997. © Andreas Gursky/Courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin London/DACS 2021.
- 2.1 44 rue des Écoles, Paris, Google Street View. Photograph by the author.
- 2.2 William Klein, *Moscow, May Day*, 1961 © William Klein.
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- 3.5 Stephen Shore, 'Washington Street, Watertown, New York August 1, 1976', Chromogenic colour print. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

- 4.1 Tom Hanks, Audrey Tautou, *The Da Vinci Code*, 2006. AA Film Archive/Alamy.
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- 4.8 Piet Mondrian, Dutch, 1872–1944, *Composition with Grid, #1*, 1918. Oil on canvas, dimensions: 80.2 × 49.8 cm (31 9/16 × 19 5/8 in). The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Gift of Mr & Mrs Pierre Schlumberger, 63.16. Copyright: © photograph The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: Will Michels, photographer.
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